



King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1093/ehr/cev158](https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cev158)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Morgan-Owen, D. G. (2015). Cooked up in the Dinner Hour? Sir Arthur Wilson's War Plan, Reconsidered. *The English Historical Review*, 130(545), 865–906. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cev158>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Cooked up in the Dinner Hour? Sir Arthur Wilson's War Plan, Reconsidered**

In the summer of 1911, escalating tensions between France and Germany threatened to plunge the continent of Europe into war. In anticipation of hostilities, the British government convened a select sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) to discuss potential British involvement in the event of a Franco–German conflict. At this conclave, a debate took place between the government's senior naval and military advisors, who proposed widely differing national strategies: either the commitment of British troops to the Continent in support of France or a maritime-only option, involving a 'close' blockade and amphibious landings on the German coastline. Historians have long viewed the meeting—the last official discussion of British national strategy at the CID prior to the outbreak of the First World War—as a decisive indicator of the Liberal government's strategic intentions in the event of a European war. While it is no longer considered that the outcome confirmed a British military 'continental commitment', or predestined British intervention in a continental war at all, it is generally accepted that the War Office General Staff scored a major political victory over the Admiralty in the eyes of the assembled politicians.¹ Indeed, historians have been unanimous in agreeing that the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson, badly mishandled the Navy's case.²

* The phrase 'cooked up in the dinner hour' was first coined to describe the performance of the Admiralty representatives at the 114th meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence by the then Naval Assistant Secretary, Maurice Hankey. However, Hankey's memoirs contain a typographical error in their reproduction of this phrase, which has been corrected for the purposes of the title of this essay: see M.P.A. Hankey, *The Supreme Command, 1914–18* (2 vols., London, 1961), i, 81, and K. Wilson, 'Hankey's Appendix: Some Admiralty Manoeuvres During and After the Agadir Crisis, 1911', *War in History*, i (1994), p. 82, n. 8. I should like to thank the two anonymous referees for their perceptive comments on earlier drafts of this article. The analysis, opinions and conclusions expressed or implied in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent the views of the Joint Services Command and Staff College, the UK Ministry of Defence or any other government agency.

¹ The literature on the meeting is vast and it would be impossible to summarise it exhaustively here. For the most recent scholarship on the topic, see H. Strachan, 'The British Army, its General Staff and the Continental Commitment, 1904–14', in D. French and B. Holden Reid, eds., *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation, c.1890–1939* (London, 2002), pp. 74–94, and T.G. Otte, '"The Method in which we were Schooled by Experience": British Strategy and a Continental Commitment before 1914', in K. Neilson and G. Kennedy, eds., *The British Way in Warfare: Power and the International System, 1856–1956* (Farnham, 2010), pp. 301–24.

² For a selection of criticisms see Hankey, *Supreme Command*, i, 81; A.J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904–1919* (5 vols., London 1961–70), i, 370–72 and 389–93; S.R. Williamson Jr., *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904–1914* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), pp. 189–94; J. Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy, c.1900–1916* (London, 1974), pp. 289–92; P. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (London, 1994), p. 21; D. Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford, 1996), p. 213; H. Strachan, *The First World War I To Arms* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 394–5; C.I. Hamilton, *The Making of the Modern Admiralty: British Naval*

At the meeting, held on 23 August, Wilson informed the sub-committee that 'the policy of the Admiralty on the outbreak of war with Germany would be to blockade the whole of the German North Sea coast', and that he intended to augment this action with a series of ambitious amphibious operations.³ Such a strategy, he argued, represented the best means available of tying down sufficient German divisions to reduce the military pressure on France. However, neither the politicians nor the military members of the Committee were impressed by the Admiral's plans. Reacting to Wilson's presentation, the Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, quipped that 'I only hope they [the Germans] may be filled with as much misgiving as I am'.⁴ Churchill was not alone in expressing concerns about the Admiralty presentation. The Naval Assistant Secretary to the Committee and former naval war planner, Maurice Hankey, later remarked that the Admiralty's scheme savoured of having been 'cooked up in the dinner hour'.⁵ Richard Haldane, the Secretary of State for War, threatened to resign from the Cabinet if a naval general staff was not formed immediately to improve the Admiralty's apparently moribund planning process⁶ and the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith condemned Wilson's plan as 'puerile' and 'wholly impracticable'.⁷ Taking their lead from these contemporaries, historians have heaped opprobrium upon both Wilson and the strategy he outlined to the sub-committee: it has variously been labelled as 'dangerous and ill-thought-out',⁸ 'vague, ill-advised and dangerous'⁹ and 'patently unworkable'.¹⁰ One scholar has even argued that the First Sea Lord was so out of step with the course of Admiralty planning that it was unlikely that his orders would have been carried out in the event of war.¹¹ Thus, historians now agree that while the Admiralty's poor performance did not directly result in a British commitment to military intervention on the continent, Wilson's failure to articulate a coherent

Policy-Making, 1805–1927 (Cambridge, 2011), p. 224; N.A. Lambert, 'Admiral Sir Arthur Knyvett-Wilson, V.C. (1910–1911)', in M.H. Murfett, ed., *The First Sea Lords from Fisher to Mountbatten* (Westport, CT, 1995), pp. 45–7; N.A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (Columbia, SC, 1999), pp. 203–11; and N.A. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), pp. 152–5.

³ The National Archives [hereafter TNA], CAB 2/2, fo. 130, CID, 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting, August 23rd, 1911', p. 11.

⁴ Cambridge, Churchill College Archives Centre [hereafter CAC], AGDF 2/1, fos. 93–4, A. Grant-Duff, diary entry, 25 Aug. 1911.

⁵ Hankey, *Supreme Command*, i. 81.

⁶ Haldane to Asquith, 31 Aug. 1911, quoted in J.P. MacKintosh, 'The Role of the Committee of Imperial Defence before 1914', *English Historical Review*, lxxvii (1962), p. 499, and Williamson, *Politics of Grand Strategy*, p. 194.

⁷ National Library of Scotland [hereafter NLS], Haldane Papers, MS 5909, fo. 140, Asquith to Haldane, 31 Aug. 1911.

⁸ P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (1976; new edn. London, 2004 new edn), p. 235.

⁹ Williamson, *Politics of Grand Strategy*, p. 192.

¹⁰ Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, p. 154.

¹¹ Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, p. 206, and Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, p. 154.

alternative to the General Staff's proposals almost certainly prevented the development of plans for amphibious operations in the immediate pre-war period;¹² revealed chronic weaknesses in the Admiralty's planning process;¹³ and demonstrated Wilson's personal failure to keep up with the rapid pace of technological development.¹⁴

However, in their willingness to castigate the Admiralty's supposedly inadequate strategic planning process, historians have neglected a body of evidence vital to the accurate comprehension of the plans that Wilson revealed to the sub-committee in August 1911. These documents confirm that the plans which Wilson presented more closely reflected the consensus of Admiralty opinion than has generally been appreciated.¹⁵ Indeed, this material demonstrates that, far from failing to appreciate the conditions of modern naval warfare, Wilson was in fact something of a progressive strategist, and that the plans he put forward to the CID were based upon the Navy's latest practical experiments in anti-submarine warfare. Knowledge of these documents necessitates a major re-assessment, both of the Admiralty's strategic planning process and of Wilson's much-maligned role within it. It also has significant implications not only for our understanding of British strategy during the Agadir Crisis, but also of Admiralty planning during the First World War. Wilson returned from retirement to serve as an advisor to the naval leadership for much of the War and, as we shall see, during that period Churchill considered the Admiral's strategic views to be sufficiently cogent to adopt the defining principles of the strategy that Sir Arthur had originally outlined to the CID during the Agadir Crisis. Indeed, from December 1914 onwards, it appears that Churchill subscribed far more closely to Wilson's strategic advice than he did to that of Admiral Sir John Fisher, whom he had recalled to direct the Admiralty's war effort some two months earlier. This article will therefore seek to demonstrate that the key naval elements of the strategy that Sir Arthur Wilson outlined to the CID in August 1911 were far more realistic than is generally appreciated and that, but for the Cabinet's decision to attack the Dardanelles in January 1915, an updated iteration of them might have been implemented during the First World War.

12 Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, i. 388–95; Williamson, *Politics of Grand Strategy*, p. 196; D. French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning* (London, 1982), p. 32; and Strachan, 'Continental Commitment, 1904–14', p. 77.

13 Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, i. 205–6, 244–5, 246–7, 256–7 and 265; N.A.M. Rodger, *The Admiralty* (Lavenham, 1979), pp. 126–7 and 129; Williamson, *Politics of Grand Strategy*, pp. 182–92; A. Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford, 1989), p. 285; Strachan, *First World War*, i. 379–81; N. Black, *The British Naval Staff in the First World War* (Woodbridge, 2009), pp. 54–8; and Hamilton, *Making of the Modern Admiralty*, pp. 222–5.

14 Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, i. 213–14, 370–1 and 389–93; French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning*, p. 32; Stevenson, *Armaments*, p. 213; Strachan, *First World War*, i. 394; Hamilton, *Making of the Modern Admiralty*, p. 224; Lambert, 'Wilson'; Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, pp. 203–11; and Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, pp. 152–4.

15 S.T. Grimes, *Strategy and War Planning in the British Navy, 1887–1918* (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 164–71; D.G. Morgan-Owen, "'History is a Record of Exploded Ideas': Sir John Fisher and Home Defence, 1904–1910", *International History Review*, xxxvi (2014), pp. 550–72.

I

Scholarly criticisms of the plans that Wilson outlined to the CID in August 1911 have been founded upon the basic supposition that the aggressive inshore operations he proposed were no longer realistic in the face of increasingly effective underwater weaponry. David French, for example, has asserted that 'Wilson's plan was unrealistic because it ignored the dangers a fleet operating near the German coast would face from mines and submarines'.¹⁶ On first inspection, this criticism seems to be entirely reasonable. Indeed, questions as to the practicality of such operations under modern conditions began at the meeting of the CID itself. In his presentation, Wilson appeared to betray an inconsistent appreciation of the dangers German torpedo craft would pose to ships operating off the German coastline. While emphasising that 'the safety of our Fleet depended upon preventing the German destroyers from getting out',¹⁷ he made no mention of how he intended to mitigate the danger that German submarines and mines would pose to British vessels conducting the operations he envisaged off the German coastline. Wilson's ambiguous treatment of this important point provoked several members of the Committee to express their doubts as to the practicality of the proposed inshore operations. During the subsequent discussion, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), Field Marshal Sir William Nicholson, pointed out the great danger that enemy submarines would pose to British ships operating off the German coastline and declared that any plan which involved placing warships and troop transports in such a vulnerable position would be 'doomed to failure'. Churchill was equally concerned, enquiring 'whether our ships would not incur great risk by entering these narrow waters'.¹⁸ However, the most authoritative criticism of Wilson's proposals was that of Maurice Hankey, the Naval Assistant Secretary to the Committee. In his memoirs, Hankey (who went on to become one of the most influential figures in the British defence establishment during the First World War) recalled how 'most of those present were genuinely alarmed at the hint of an attempt at a close blockade of the German coast in the face of submarines and destroyers'.¹⁹ Hankey's depiction of the professional head of the Royal Navy as something of a reactionary who failed to appreciate the implications new technologies had upon the conduct of war at sea has subsequently informed widespread scholarly criticism, both of the apparent weaknesses in Admiralty administration that had allowed the

¹⁶ French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning*, p. 23. This argument has become entrenched in the mainstream literature; see Stevenson, *Armaments*, p. 213, and Strachan, *First World War*, i. 394.

¹⁷ TNA, CAB 2/2, fo. 132, 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting', p. 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, fo. 131, pp. 12–13.

¹⁹ Hankey, *Supreme Command*, i. 81.

First Sea Lord to make such an ostensibly incoherent presentation to the government, and of Wilson himself.

This criticism of Wilson for reviving the apparently moribund strategy of close blockade has been reinforced by research on the Admiralty's planning process. Scholarship on this topic has tended to emphasise that the Navy had moved away from close blockade in the early 1900s for the same reasons suggested by Hankey; namely that torpedoes, submarines and mines had made such an endeavour too risky to be seriously contemplated under modern conditions. This interpretation, popularised by the influential American scholar Arthur J. Marder in the 1940s, has led successive historians to argue that Wilson was out of step with the consensus of expert opinion when he advocated reverting to a close blockade in August 1911. Marder argued that, beginning in the early 1900s, 'the increasing power of the torpedo and the submarine profoundly affected naval strategy, tactics, and ship construction'.²⁰ Basing his analysis upon the records of the manoeuvres the Navy conducted between 1888 and 1905, he concluded that 'close blockade received its *coup de grâce* by 1903–4', and that by 1904 at the latest 'the Board [of Admiralty] ... seriously doubted whether close blockade would be feasible in future'.²¹ Marder's analysis of the development of naval thought over the previous decades led him to criticise Wilson's apparent willingness to ignore the evidence of successive practical exercises by reviving the close blockade in the summer of 1911, stating his belief that 'close blockade was by this date too risky' and that 'no admiral would have undertaken to keep a squadron cruising constantly in the Bight thirty miles from Heligoland'.²²

Scholars working on the development of Admiralty strategic planning have tended to support Marder's interpretation, both of the development of British blockade doctrine away from a close blockade²³ and of Wilson's limitations as a strategist.²⁴ Indeed, the recent trend has been to place an even greater emphasis on the transformative impact of underwater weaponry on naval warfare. Nicholas A. Lambert has argued that, confronted with the difficulties of mounting a close blockade in the face of enemy torpedo craft and submarines, the Admiralty had decided to adopt an 'entirely new' strategy based around 'mutual sea denial' after 1904. According to this revisionist interpretation, under the leadership of the 'radical naval thinker' Admiral Sir John Fisher, the Navy planned and implemented the 'revolutionary' new strategy of 'flotilla defence', which relied upon using torpedo craft and submarines

20 A.J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power* (New York, 1940), p. 368.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 368–9.

22 Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, i. 370–1.

23 Kennedy, *British Naval Mastery*, pp. 243–4, and M. Partridge, 'The Royal Navy and the End of Close Blockade, 1885–1905: A Revolution in Naval Strategy?', *Mariner's Mirror*, lxxv (1989), pp. 119–36.

24 Kennedy, *British Naval Mastery*, p. 235.

to 'deny' the use of the North Sea to enemy armoured vessels.²⁵ This strategy was supposedly in place by 1905 and survived until Fisher retired at the end of 1909.²⁶ On this basis, Lambert echoes Marder in arguing that Fisher never seriously contemplated enforcing a close blockade before 1910, although he reaches that conclusion by a markedly different route. According to Lambert, Wilson—whom Fisher had selected as his successor on the basis that the two men shared the same strategic outlook—reversed some of the more innovative and dynamic planning conducted by the previous regime²⁷ and departed from the consensus of Admiralty opinion, which remained in favour of limited North Sea operations and plans to wage economic warfare against Germany.²⁸ In the face of this scholarship, Wilson's reputation among historians as a deficient strategist has hardened in recent years. Indeed, the belief that Wilson put forward an unrealistic plan to the sub-committee on 23 August 1911 is now so well established that, with one exception,²⁹ little serious effort has been made to challenge this viewpoint.

Wilson's presentation to the CID was, without doubt, unsuccessful. It provoked a considerable political backlash against the Admiralty, which ultimately resulted in Churchill being appointed to the post of First Lord of the Admiralty with a brief to reform the naval administration and to create a naval staff with the capacity to prepare coherent strategic plans. However, upon closer inspection, the notion that it was the manifest impracticality of close blockade under modern conditions that provoked this censure is open to serious question. Evidence that the close blockade had not been discredited by naval planners was provided in the autumn of 1911, when the Director of Naval Intelligence, Rear Admiral Alexander Bethell, appeared before another CID sub-committee, convened to investigate the question of British trade with Germany in time of war.³⁰ The nature of the Admiralty's strategic intentions was a matter of considerable relevance to the proceedings of this body, since it had important legal ramifications for the Navy's ability to seize the cargoes of neutral ships bound for

25 N.A. Lambert, 'Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence, 1904–1909', *Journal of Military History*, lix (1995), pp. 639–60; Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, pp. 10, 116–17, 121–6, 162–4, 174–6 and 183–4; N.A. Lambert, 'Transformation and Technology in the Fisher Era: The Impact of the Communications Revolution', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, xxvii (2004), pp. 272–97 at pp. 278–9; N.A. Lambert, 'Strategic Command and Control for Maneuver Warfare: Creation of the Royal Navy's War Room System, 1905–1915', *Journal of Military History*, lxix (2005), pp. 361–410; and Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, pp. 32, 41–2, 59 and 75–7.

26 Lambert, 'Flotilla Defence', pp. 654–8, and Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, pp. 122–3.

27 Lambert, 'Wilson', pp. 45–7; Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, pp. 203–11; Lambert, 'Transformation and Technology', p. 286; and Lambert, 'Strategic Command and Control', pp. 389–91.

28 That Wilson halted earlier plans for economic warfare against Germany was first suggested in Offer, *Agrarian Interpretation*, pp. 285–8. This view is partially qualified in Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, pp. 153–5.

29 Grimes, *Strategy and War Planning*, pp. 164–70; however, even this analysis presents only a partial picture.

30 The records of this body are held in TNA, CAB 17/89.

German ports in wartime. While Bethell was not obliged to divulge any details of Admiralty strategy to the sub-committee, he did provide a general indication of the naval leadership's intentions in the event of war with Germany. At a meeting of the group on 22 November, he informed the assembly that 'it was the intention of the Admiralty to establish a close blockade of the North Sea ports on the declaration of war'.³¹ If a close blockade was widely considered to be unworkable under modern conditions and this had been the cause of the hostile reception that Wilson's presentation had received on 23 August, the government would surely not have allowed the Admiralty's adherence to such an outdated approach to prejudice a major investigation into an issue of considerable national importance some three months later. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that Churchill would have permitted such a nominally retrograde step had his appointment as First Lord been due primarily to the impracticality of close blockade.

Moreover, the notion that Wilson's performance discredited his views on naval strategic issues is also problematic. His opinion continued to carry appreciable weight with senior politicians after his enforced retirement at the end of 1911. Indeed, Sir Arthur retained sufficient authority and political confidence to challenge the incumbent Admiralty administration until well into the First World War. This is demonstrated by internal Admiralty correspondence during the summer of 1913. At that point, Admiralty officials wanted to petition the CID for funds to mount fixed defences at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, which location was increasingly gaining favour among naval planners as the Fleet's principal anchorage in the event of war with Germany. However, during the ensuing discussion, Churchill explained to his professional colleagues that 'I apprehend the greatest difficulties in obtaining the assent of CID or the Cabinet to these proposals, in view of Sir Arthur Wilson's almost certain opposition'.³² Why Churchill considered Wilson's dissent to be such a definitive obstruction to the War Staff's proposals if the Admiral's views had been entirely discredited in the eyes of the Cabinet by his performance in August 1911 is unclear. Moreover, Haldane—who had been especially critical of the Admiral in the wake of the Agadir Crisis—petitioned Churchill to recall Wilson to the Admiralty after the outbreak of war in October 1914,³³ and Churchill subsequently heeded this advice. Churchill even attempted to return Wilson to the post of First Sea Lord, following Fisher's resignation in May 1915.³⁴ The political support that Wilson enjoyed in 1914–15 is at odds with the notion that he had betrayed fundamental weaknesses in his proficiency as a strategist in August 1911. Politicians undoubtedly

³¹ TNA, WO 106/45, CID, 'Enquiry Regarding Trading with the Enemy, Minutes of the Second Meeting, November 22, 1911', pp. 2–3.

³² TNA, ADM 116/1293, Note by Churchill, 11 Aug. 1913.

³³ R. Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone* (Oxford, 1973), p. 457.

³⁴ Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, ii. 281–2.

had good reason to view Wilson as a poor custodian of the Admiralty in peacetime, but the fact that his stock rose rapidly after the outbreak of war indicates that they retained considerable faith in his competence as a potential strategic director of the Navy.

That aspects of Wilson's strategic thinking caused consternation among members of the CID in August 1911, not least the Prime Minister, is beyond dispute. In the aftermath of the meeting Asquith confided to Haldane that 'A. Wilson's "plan" can only be described as puerile, and I have dismissed it at once as wholly impractical'.³⁵ Nevertheless, analysis as to why the members of the CID were so dismayed by Wilson's plans reveals that the Committee's response did not result from a keen awareness of recent developments in naval warfare that may have rendered the strategy of close blockade unrealistic, but was rather the consequence of a combination of factors largely incidental to the viability of the naval aspects of Wilson's scheme. In order to appreciate the manner in which Wilson's reputation as a sound source of advice on naval strategic matters survived the Agadir Crisis, it is therefore necessary to differentiate between the naval and grand strategic aspects of the plan that Wilson outlined to the CID. The tendency of historians to conflate these aspects of Wilson's presentation is superficially appropriate: the Admiral failed to make clear that he was attempting to outline more than a purely naval plan of campaign, making no mention of commercial blockade or operations outside the North Sea.³⁶ Yet, the scheme he described to the sub-committee did in fact represent an attempt at more than just a naval war plan. This much can be seen from the detail of Wilson's proposals about amphibious operations.

Wilson's initial presentation described amphibious landings as a 'necessary' adjunct to naval operations in the Heligoland Bight.³⁷ However, while he considered the seizure of an advanced base from which to refuel the Navy's destroyers to be desirable from a naval perspective, Wilson does not appear to have viewed amphibious landings as vital to the enforcement of the blockade itself. In his presentation he had explained that, 'if possible we should maintain our watch upon the German coast-line with destroyers', but acknowledged that 'they would, however be 300 miles way from any British base, so that none of them could remain very long at a time on station'. He also accepted that 'the destroyers would retire when driven off by the enemy's larger ships'.³⁸ These statements strongly suggest that he did not intend to establish permanent positions on the German littoral to facilitate the naval blockade. This much was confirmed

35 NLS, MS 5905, fo. 140, Asquith to Haldane, 31 Aug. 1911.

36 For Wilson's scepticism about the efficacy of blockading Germany, see Offer, *Agrarian Interpretation*, pp. 285–6 and Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, pp. 131–6.

37 TNA, CAB 2/2, fos. 130–1, 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting', pp. 11–12.

38 TNA, CAB 2/2, fo. 130, 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting', p. 11.

during the discussion of his presentation, when Wilson qualified his support for assaults against Wilhelmshaven, Wangeroog and the Kiel Canal, explaining that such additional landings might oblige the Germans to retain troops for the defence of their coasts 'apart from the direct advantage to the Navy'. Under questioning from Churchill, he admitted that the seizure of the potential targets he had mentioned 'was not essential' to the naval aspects of his scheme. Crucially, when pressed further as to 'whether the close blockade and the landing of troops' were both essential, Wilson replied simply that 'all the experience of recent manoeuvres showed that close blockade was necessary'; he made no mention of the necessity of landing military forces on the German mainland to support the operation.³⁹ The amphibious landings and the close blockade were not, therefore, mutually dependent. This was certainly the impression that the Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, drew from the proceedings. During the discussion Grey stated that, 'so far as he could judge, the combined operations outlined were not essential to naval success'.⁴⁰ When Grey pressed Wilson as to whether the capture of Schillighorn was vital to his plans, the Admiral admitted simply 'that it was not essential'. Thus, it appears that Wilson's advocacy of multiple landings on the German coastline was his attempt at grand, as opposed to simply naval, strategy. In a paper dating from May 1907, Wilson had previously outlined his conviction that, should Britain be drawn into a Franco-German war in support of France, 'the only way in which we could give serious assistance to France would be by a floating army, making raids on different parts of the German coast and so diverting troops from the main theatre of war'.⁴¹ In 1909 he had reiterated to the Cabinet his view that maritime blockade alone would be insufficient to force Germany to terms.⁴² Significantly, while Wilson had envisaged using 'obsolete types' of vessel to conduct inshore bombardments in amphibious raids in 1907, at that point he had not contemplated enforcing a close blockade in conjunction with such landings. Wilson's support for amphibious operations against the German mainland coastline therefore appears to have been distinct from the purely naval aspects of his strategic thinking. Recognition of this fact is vital to the accurate assessment of the Admiralty's presentation in August 1911, which was an attempt at describing a purely maritime national strategy, rather than a naval war plan. Articulating the benefits of a grand strategy based upon sea power placed the First Sea Lord at a disadvantage relative to the military representatives at the meeting, who could focus specifically on military operations on the Continent. A major naval defeat could have had catastrophic implications for Britain's position

39 TNA, CAB 2/2, fos. 130–1, 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting', pp. 11–12.

40 Ibid., fo. 132, p. 14.

41 A. Wilson, 'Remarks on the War Plans', May, 1907, in P. Kemp, ed., *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher* (2 vols., London, 1960–64), ii. 459.

42 Offer, *Agrarian Interpretation*, p. 285.

as the pre-eminent financial and maritime power, would have dealt a crushing blow to civilian morale and threatened the integrity of the Empire. The Admiralty's plan had to consider all of these dangers, while simultaneously explaining how British command of the sea could be brought to bear on Germany, a continental power with internal lines of communication and access to the resources of neighbouring states. By contrast, the General Staff had simply to outline their intentions for the six divisions of the British Expeditionary Force, the fate of which was largely incidental to British national interests and to public morale.

Attempting to assess the extent to which Wilson's 'floating army' alone represented a credible strategy for Britain to adopt in the event of a Franco-German war is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that it appears open to no less doubt than the General Staff's claim that 'it was quite likely that our six divisions might prove to be the deciding factor'⁴³ in the opening moves of a Continental war. Asquith certainly appears to have been unconvinced by either option in the aftermath of the meeting.⁴⁴ Rather, it is important to appreciate that it was the Admiralty's failure to make adequate preparations to assess and prepare to implement its proposed national strategy, rather than the detail of its close blockade plan, that resulted in the trenchant criticisms by the political leaders present at the 114th meeting of the CID. The cavalier manner in which Wilson proposed such major amphibious operations—without consulting the War Office or even calculating the exact number of troops that would be required—was clearly open to justifiable criticism. The Admiralty's unwillingness to consult the War Office regarding the practicality of such ambitious joint operations was characteristic of the naval leadership's hostile and unco-operative attitude to both the War Office and the CID, which did little to endear it to political leaders.⁴⁵ This latest, egregious example of the Admiralty's apparent disdain for discussing its intentions, even with those other government departments integral to the success of its plans, was doubtless compounded by Wilson's complacent assertion that 'he did not anticipate any difficulty' in storming the heavily fortified island of Heligoland with marines immediately after the outbreak of war.⁴⁶

Equally damaging was the impression of administrative incompetence conveyed earlier in the meeting, when neither Wilson nor the First Lord of the Admiralty, Reginald McKenna, appeared to have been aware that the Admiralty's Transport Department had already co-operated with the General Staff in the production of plans to convey a military force to the Continent at the outset of a Franco-German war.⁴⁷ The lack of

43 TNA, CAB 2/2, fo. 127, 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting', p. 5.

44 NLS, MS 5909, fo. 140, Asquith to Haldane, 31 Aug. 1911, and fo. 146, Asquith to Haldane, 9 Sept. 1911; and Williamson, *Politics of Grand Strategy*, pp. 193–204.

45 Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, i. 213–14.

46 TNA, CAB 2/2, fo. 131, 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting', p. 12.

47 This was subsequently proven to be a misunderstanding: NLS, MS 5909, fo. 147, Haldane to Asquith, 28 Sept. 1911.

co-operation and foresight revealed by the Admiralty representatives explained the condemnation they received; as Hankey tersely recorded, 'the failure of the Admiralty to co-ordinate its plans with those of the War Office made a most unfavourable impression on the Government'.⁴⁸ As it was the Admiralty's failure to prepare a credible national strategy, rather than the detail of its close blockade plan, which was the primary cause of the criticisms that Asquith, Haldane and Churchill voiced following the naval presentation, their continued respect for Wilson's views on purely naval issues is comprehensible. It also places an important qualification on the evidence frequently deployed to support the viewpoint that the close blockade strategy was outdated and retrograde. Consequently, much of this interpretation relies upon Hankey's testimony and on scholarly analysis of British blockade doctrine. We shall therefore consider each of these elements in turn.

As we have seen, in his memoirs Hankey did much to establish the picture of Wilson as an outdated strategist. He recollected how 'most of those present were genuinely alarmed at the hint of an attempt at a close blockade of the German coast in the face of submarines and destroyers' and stated that 'Admiral Wilson had filled me with dismay' at the meeting.⁴⁹ However, there is evidence to suggest that this nominally authoritative testimony is misleading. Earlier in the year, in February 1911, Hankey had produced a memorandum on 'The Declaration of London from the point of view of War with Germany'. This document evaluated the potential impact that British ratification of the Declaration of London—an international agreement intended to regulate the laws of war at sea—might have upon the action of the Royal Navy during an Anglo-German war. In the paper, Hankey set out the consequences of British non-ratification of the agreement. One of its key passages read:

all of these articles can be conveyed during war into or out of any German port in neutral bottoms unless we have declared a blockade of that port. The only remedy is to establish a blockade of the whole German coast. So far as the ports in the North Sea are concerned this should present no insurmountable difficulty.⁵⁰

The full significance of this document becomes clear when the legal definition of a 'blockade' as set out in the Declaration of London is considered. For a port or stretch of coastline to be considered 'under blockade', the blockade had to be effective, 'i.e. it must be maintained by a force sufficient to prevent access to the enemy's coastline'.⁵¹ In

48 Hankey, *Supreme Command*, i. 82.

49 Hankey, *Supreme Command*, i. 81.

50 TNA, ADM 116/1236, Hankey, 'The Declaration of London from the point of view of War with Germany', 15 Feb. 1911, pp. 2–3.

51 TNA, ADM 137/1936, fo. 15, Callaghan, 'Blockade of the North Sea Coast of German Empire', 31 Aug. 1911, p. 1.

other words, only six months prior to Wilson's presentation to the CID during the Agadir Crisis, Hankey himself had seen 'no insurmountable difficulty' in maintaining a considerable force of British warships off the German North Sea coast. Whether Wilson's proposals did in fact cause the Naval Assistant Secretary 'dismay' on 23 August is thus clearly open to question. What does appear clear from Hankey's memoirs is that the apparent inconsistency of Admiralty statements regarding the practicality of inshore operations magnified the impression of administrative incompetence that the naval representatives gave to the Committee. Hankey noted how, at the meeting, 'Sir Arthur Wilson's own published Memorandum on Invasion, in which he had laid stress on the value of submarines and torpedo craft for dealing with enemy transports, was thrown in his face to bring out the impossibility of keeping British warships or transports off the German coast'.⁵² The memorandum in question had been drafted the previous November in anticipation of a speech by Lord Roberts to the House of Lords on the necessity of compulsory service. It had then been reproduced as an appendix to the second edition of General Sir Ian Hamilton's book, *Compulsory Service*, which appeared in January 1911.⁵³ In it, the Admiralty had emphasised the important role which it was expected that submarines would play in defeating a German invasion attempt:

supposing that by some extraordinary lucky chance the transports were able to reach our coast without being detected ... long before half the troops could be landed, the transports would be attacked and sunk by submarines which are stationed along the coast for that purpose.⁵⁴

It went on to suggest that, when combined with the Navy's large number of destroyers, submarines would form 'a very effective second line of defence'. The logical inference from this paper was that vessels acting as part of a close blockade would be similarly vulnerable to submarine and destroyer attack. After Wilson's presentation on 23 August 1911, Nicholson, the CIGS, referred specifically to Wilson's 'invasion' memorandum when he questioned the Admiral's logic in advocating amphibious and inshore operations in the face of German submarines and destroyers.⁵⁵ Wilson's reply—that the situation off the German coastline would be different from that which had been discussed in the Admiralty's earlier memorandum—was unconvincing.

Although not mentioned by Hankey in his memoirs, another series of statements by Wilson may have played an equally important role in shaping the reaction to his presentation.⁵⁶ In June 1909, some six

⁵² Hankey, *Supreme Command*, i. 81.

⁵³ I. Hamilton, *Compulsory Service: A Study of the Question in Light of Experience* (2nd edn., London, 1911).

⁵⁴ TNA, CAB 17/100, fo. 23, Admiralty, 'Notes', 19 Nov. 1910, p. 1.

⁵⁵ TNA, CAB 2/2, fo. 131, 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting', p. 12.

⁵⁶ Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, pp. 206–7.

months before he became First Sea Lord, Wilson had been summoned to provide expert testimony to a CID enquiry into the administration of Sir John Fisher, convened as the result of accusations made by Admiral Lord Charles Beresford. On that occasion, during a discussion of strategic issues, Wilson had stated that:

After a great deal of consideration I decided that it was quite impossible to attempt to keep a really close watch off the German ports, because of the risk ... Therefore I came to the conclusion that you could not keep a really effective watch off the German ports.⁵⁷

During these earlier proceedings the Prime Minister, Asquith, had been much impressed by the Admiral's clarity and manner, and accepted his opinions as authoritative.⁵⁸ Haldane and Grey had also witnessed Wilson's testimony to the Beresford Enquiry.⁵⁹ That Wilson had apparently reversed the position that he had outlined to the CID only two years earlier cannot but have contributed to the negative impression created by his presentation to the Committee in August 1911. However, while such inconsistency certainly hinted at the need for a general staff to co-ordinate naval strategic planning in a more coherent manner, it was far from definitive proof that Wilson was an incompetent naval strategist. Rather, Wilson's apparently contradictory statements merely demonstrated that the Admiral had changed his mind on the advisability of enforcing a close blockade of the German coastline since June 1909.⁶⁰ We shall re-examine the reasoning that led Wilson to make this *volte face* presently. But, before doing so, it is necessary to address claims that Wilson was out of touch with recent trends in Admiralty strategic thought. In order to do so, a brief re-assessment of Admiralty planning under Admiral Sir John Fisher, Wilson's predecessor, is required.

Historians have long criticised Admiralty planning under Fisher, arguing that no consistent consideration of strategic issues occurred under his leadership, and that such war plans as were produced were often intended to deflect criticism of Fisher's regime, rather than to be genuine representations of naval strategic thought.⁶¹ Indeed, some historians have recently claimed that this duplicity was symptomatic

⁵⁷ TNA, CAB 16/9A, CID, Report and Proceedings of the Beresford Enquiry, pp. 307–8.

⁵⁸ Fisher to Hankey, 29 Aug. 1911, quoted in Mackay, *Fisher*, pp. 430–1, and Hankey, *Supreme Command*, i. 83.

⁵⁹ TNA, CAB 16/9A, CID, Beresford Enquiry, p. 291.

⁶⁰ Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, pp. 205–8.

⁶¹ See, for example, Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, vols. i–iv; Kemp, ed., *Fisher*, vol. ii, pp. xii and 316–17; P. Haggie, 'The Royal Navy and War Planning in the Fisher Era', *Journal of Contemporary History*, viii (1973), pp. 113–31; Mackay, *Fisher*; N. d'Ombrain, *War Machinery and High Policy: Defence Administration in Peacetime Britain* (Oxford, 1973), p. 157; Kennedy, *Rise and Fall*, p. 234; Rodger, *The Admiralty*, pp. 125–6; Offer, *Agrarian Interpretation*, pp. 235–6; P. Hayes, 'Britain, Germany, and the Admiralty's Plans for Attacking German Territory, 1906–1915', in L. Freedman, P. Hayes and R. O'Neill, eds., *War, Strategy, and International Politics: Essays in Honour of Sir Michael Howard* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 95–116; Strachan, *First World War*, i. 379–80 and 394; and Hamilton, *Making of the Modern Admiralty*, pp. 222–4.

of Fisher's desire to keep his 'radical' ideas on naval strategy secret and to limit opposition to his reforms.⁶² Despite these criticisms, scholars have agreed that Fisher oversaw a move away from the Navy's traditional strategy of close blockade. Marder argued that, while he did not abandon operations against the German coastline entirely, Fisher had 'no great use' for close blockade after his appointment as First Sea Lord in 1904.⁶³ More recently Nicholas Lambert has taken this argument further, suggesting that Fisher scrapped attempts to control the German coastline in favour of his 'revolutionary' new strategy of flotilla defence.⁶⁴ In Lambert's analysis, any return to a close blockade in 1911 was thus almost diametrically opposed to the trends in naval strategic thought under Fisher.⁶⁵

However, recent scholarship has demonstrated that both Marder's original account and subsequent alternative explanations are open to question.⁶⁶ In his recent reconsideration of Admiralty strategic planning in the First World War period, Shawn T. Grimes has shown how, through the introduction of countervailing weapons systems, infrastructure and tactical approaches, the Admiralty remained confident in the Navy's ability to continue to conduct extensive operations off enemy ports, without exposing valuable capital ships to torpedo attack. This was to be achieved by the development of the torpedo boat destroyer, the construction of a series of protected anchorages in which the Fleet could shelter, and by improvements in communication and co-ordination.⁶⁷ The development of British naval strategy after 1900 was thus considerably more complex than Marder's deterministic narrative suggested.

Aspects of Lambert's interpretation of British naval strategy under Fisher have also been challenged. The undeniable reality that Fisher worked consistently to concentrate the Navy's most modern armoured warships in home waters after 1904 is incompatible with Lambert's claim that Fisher intended to rely primarily upon his strategy of flotilla defence to prevent a German attack on the British Isles. In fact, it emerges that Fisher viewed the Navy's capital ships—including the new *Dreadnought* and *Invincible* class vessels—as vital to the defence of the British Isles. The First Lord intended to deploy the Fleet's most

62 J.T. Sumida, 'Sir John Fisher and the Dreadnought: The Sources of Naval Mythology', *Journal of Military History*, lix (1995), pp. 619–37; Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, pp. 189–94; Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, pp. 70–80; and C. Martin, 'The 1907 Naval War Plans and the Second Hague Peace Conference: A Case of Propaganda', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, xxviii (2005), pp. 833–56.

63 Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, i. 369.

64 Lambert, 'Flotilla Defence', and Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, pp. 10, 116–17, 121–6, 162–4, 174–6, 183–4.

65 Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, pp. 201–11; Lambert, 'Transformation and Technology', pp. 286–8; Lambert, 'Strategic Command and Control', pp. 389–92; and Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, pp. 132–7 and 150–5.

66 Grimes, *War Planning*, chs. 1–2.

67 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–40.

modern, powerful vessels into the North Sea in secret during a period of strained diplomatic relations, with the express purpose of intercepting any German military raid on the British Isles.⁶⁸ These plans were the product of a lengthy investigation by the Admiralty, each stage of which confirmed the ongoing centrality of capital ships to planning for war against Germany.

In February 1907 Captain Edmond Slade, Head of the Naval War College, provided the Admiralty with a summary of recent strategic war games conducted under his supervision. Such exercises were commonly used to inform planning and the Admiralty often dictated the scenarios to be tested.⁶⁹ Slade's report emphasised that 'the importance of *always having a strong force in the North Sea cannot be overrated*.'⁷⁰ Towards the end of that year, a covert committee of four captains was formed at the College to investigate the detail of such a force. This body, under the chairmanship of Captain Sydney Fremantle, was given the task of investigating the correct position 'for our battleships' during a period of strained relations with Germany.⁷¹ That the Admiralty considered the armoured units of the Home Fleet, rather than its flotilla and submarine forces, as the vital factor in securing the British position in the North Sea was confirmed soon thereafter. Upon receiving the report of the Fremantle Committee, Slade's successor, Rear Admiral Robert S. Lowry, forwarded its recommendations to the Admiralty. In an accompanying letter Lowry endorsed the Committee's recommendations. He advocated grouping '3 to 6 of our fastest battleships, based on Rosyth, putting to a sea rendez-vous on strained relations' to frustrate a surprise invasion attempt, with the Channel Fleet held ready 'to be the force to deal the smashing blow.'⁷² Early the following year, Slade (now Director of Naval Intelligence) issued orders to the Home Fleet which outlined its role as the 'North Sea Guard' during the opening moves of an Anglo-German war.⁷³ That Fisher continued to view the presence of capital ships in the North Sea as vital in the event of Anglo-German hostilities seems clear. If any lingering uncertainty on this point did remain, it was dispelled by new war plans issued in early 1909. These plans were unambiguous in their instruction to the C-in-C Home Fleet

68 Morgan-Owen, 'Exploded Ideas'. See also M.S. Seligmann, 'The Renaissance of Pre-First World War Naval History', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, xxxvi (2013), pp. 454–79.

69 A. Lambert, 'The Naval War Course, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* and the Origins of "The British Way in Warfare"', in Neilson and Kennedy, eds., *British Way in Warfare*, pp. 228–35 and 236–8.

70 Portsmouth, National Museum of the Royal Navy [hereafter NMRN], Crease Papers, individually unnumbered by new catalogue system, contained in box including MSS 253/20–32 (labeled 'Box 2, number 7' under previous catalogue), Slade to Fisher, 11 Feb. 1907 in 'War Plans', pp. 21–2.

71 Greenwich, National Maritime Museum [hereafter NMM], Fremantle Papers, FRE/321/2, Report of the Fremantle Committee, 18 Dec. 1907, p. 6, inside docket, 'Captain S.R. Fremantle'.

72 NMM, FRE/321/2, Lowry to Slade, 24 Dec. 1907, pp. 3–4.

73 TNA, ADM 116/1043B II, fos. 86–8, Admiralty, 'Strained Relations. Scheme A' and fos. 106–7, Admiralty, 'Scheme B'.

regarding the necessity of maintaining a predominant force of British armoured warships in the North Sea under all circumstances:

Should a portion of the German Fleet evade his vigilance and escape into the Channel, he may detach such forces in pursuit as may be necessary to assist the THIRD FLEET in defeating them, but he must always maintain in the North Sea a force of capital ships superior to those of the enemy remaining in those waters.⁷⁴

The plans were equally explicit about their intention to mass British destroyers 'on the German Coast and at the entrance to the Baltic' in order to establish 'a close and perpetual surveillance' of all potential points of German access to the North Sea. These documents strongly suggest that existing depictions of Admiralty strategic planning under Fisher are incomplete.⁷⁵

As the supposed contrast between planning under Fisher and Wilson has underwritten the remaining criticisms of the latter's performance in August 1911, it is therefore necessary to engage in a brief reconsideration of the course of Admiralty strategic planning in the last years of the Fisher regime. Grimes' recent work has illustrated that, after initially projecting aggressive inshore operations against the German North Sea coastline between 1902 and 1906, the naval leadership intended to rely upon a more conservative 'observational' blockade by 1907. Such an approach was characterised by the use of flotilla craft to watch enemy exits, while the Fleet remained at a distance, safe from the action of enemy torpedo craft. The Fleet might close towards the German coastline during daytime, as the flotilla was considered capable of suppressing local defending forces for a limited period, but would necessarily remain distant during the night, when small torpedo boats might issue forth from port undetected.⁷⁶ The documents suggest that this policy remained in place until mid-1908, as was demonstrated by a new war plan, W.I, issued in June of that year. Highlighting the seriousness with which Wilson's strategic views were taken in planning circles, war plan W.I. stated in its preamble that:

Sir Arthur Wilson after six years' experience in command of the Channel Fleet, advocates that, on the outbreak of war with Germany, our battle fleets should, as a rule, be kept well away from the German coast, and from possible interference by hostile torpedo craft. This principle is undoubtedly sound, since it must be Germany's endeavour to reach these fleets with her torpedo craft, and so try and redress the balance of strength which is at present against her. It must be remembered, however, that this general rule does not preclude any temporary forward movement which may be necessary for the purpose of covering some minor offensive operation.

⁷⁴ NMRN, Crease Papers, MS 253/84/3, Admiralty, 'War', p. 3 in 'War Plan G.U. War Orders for The Commander in Chief of the Home Fleet', 1909.

⁷⁵ Morgan-Owen, 'Exploded Ideas'.

⁷⁶ TNA, ADM 116/900B, Admiralty, 'Organization of Torpedo Craft for War', 6 May 1905.

For the same reasons Sir Arthur Wilson makes a general proposal to place no great force of ships opposite the mouths of the German rivers; these rivers should, however, be closely observed by a few cruisers and destroyers, to give notice of any war vessels which issue from them.⁷⁷

However, it appears that during the second half of 1908 the Admiralty began to reconsider the desirability of more extensive inshore operations. Manoeuvres conducted in October 1908 attempted to gauge the number of British destroyers that would be required to assure local control over the primary waterways on the German North Sea coastline; the estuaries of the rivers Elbe, Weser and Jade.⁷⁸ Concurrent with the manoeuvres, plans were drafted to form a pair of artificial refuelling stations off the German coastline, to facilitate the maintenance of a numerical superiority of British flotilla craft and submarines in the region for an extended period.⁷⁹ An updated set of war plans, drafted in September, provided a clear indication of the course of strategic thought at the Admiralty during the second half of 1908. This document, designated as war plan W.3., projected a 'closer blockade of the German North Sea Coast' than had been envisaged in the preceding plans.⁸⁰ This trend towards a 'closer' blockade clearly runs counter to the argument that developments in underwater technology gradually rendered such operations steadily more unrealistic after 1900. However, accusations that contemporary planners simply did not understand the implications of underwater weaponry for their schemes are unfounded.⁸¹ The Admiralty was keenly aware of the dangers that torpedoes and mines posed to British control of the North Sea: in December 1908 Fisher explained that it would be 'suicidal' to expose any of the armoured warships of the Fleet to torpedo attack.⁸² Indeed, it was for this very reason that the Admiralty considered a return to a 'closer' blockade as essential, as they viewed developing the maximum possible concentration of British flotilla craft against the German coastline vital to 'keeping in' hostile torpedo boats, thereby safeguarding the British Fleet from underwater attack.⁸³ In December 1908, Fisher outlined his intention to mass eighty-three destroyers off the German coastline in order to fulfil this aim.⁸⁴ That the Admiralty revived close blockade in

77 TNA, ADM 116/1043B II, fo. 732, Admiralty, 'War Plan. Germany. W.1.', June 1908, p. 2.

78 TNA, ADM 116/1037, Bridgeman to Commodore (T), 31 Oct. 1908; Grimes, *War Planning*, p. 135.

79 TNA, ADM 116/1043B II, fos. 795–6, Admiralty, 'Appendix to War Plan. Germany W.2.', June 1908, pp. 5–6.

80 TNA, ADM 116/1043B II, fo. 815, Admiralty, 'War Plan. England and France v. Germany. W.3. (Part I)', Sept. 1908, p. 17.

81 For such accusations, see Kemp, ed., *Fisher*, ii, and Haggie, 'War Planning in the Fisher Era'.

82 TNA, ADM 116/1043B I, fo. 4, Fisher, 'War Plans and the Distribution of the Fleet', Dec. 1908, p. 3.

83 Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 129–38.

84 TNA, ADM 116/1043B I, fo. 16, Appendix to Fisher, 'War Plans'.

1908–9 in order to combat the risk of torpedo attack on the Fleet was confirmed in the series of plans ('G.U.') issued early the following year.

The October 1908 flotilla craft exercises and Fisher's December 1908 paper on 'War Plans' were part of the process behind the production of a new series of war plans for the Fleet in late 1908. Fisher safeguarded the secrecy of the new plans fiercely, warning the First Lord, Reginald McKenna, that it would be 'manifestly impossible' to discuss their content at the forthcoming CID 'Beresford Enquiry' into Admiralty policy.⁸⁵ Until recently, no copy of the plans to which Fisher referred was known to have survived.⁸⁶ Fortunately, however, Fisher's naval secretary, Captain Thomas Crease, preserved a complete copy of the plans to which the First Sea Lord referred in his private papers. These documents confirm that Fisher envisaged deploying the largest possible number of flotilla craft and submarines against the German coastline, precisely in order that the armoured units of the British Fleet could traverse the North Sea, free from the danger of hostile torpedo attack. In turn, this would enable the Fleet to provide the necessary support to the flotilla craft observing the German coast. The plans explained that:

the number of destroyers and submarines that can be constantly maintained on the German Coast will exceed the total number possessed by Germany, and therefore there should be little risk bringing the squadrons [of battleships and cruisers] closer to the German Coast.⁸⁷

Fisher informed McKenna that both Admiral Sir William May and Vice-Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg, respectively the commanders of the Home and Atlantic Fleets and the most senior naval officers then afloat, both concurred with the plans.⁸⁸ The detail of the dispositions outlined in the 1909 war plans is illustrated in an extensive series of charts, the provenance of which has hitherto not been appreciated, which are preserved in Fisher's private papers (see [Figure 1](#)).

Despite being a renowned advocate of underwater weaponry, Fisher had thus adopted a war plan predicated upon a close investment against the German coastline in order to limit the danger that German torpedo craft posed to the British Fleet in late 1908. As we shall see, Wilson inherited these plans when he succeeded Fisher in early 1910.⁸⁹ The principle of adopting an increasingly aggressive strategy in order to gain control over the German littoral and to limit the danger posed by modern weaponry to British forces operating in the North Sea was firmly established before Wilson arrived at the Admiralty in January 1910. Critiques which suggest that Wilson had contradicted recent

85 CAC, McKenna Papers, MCKN 6/2, Fisher to McKenna, 19 Apr. 1909, p. 8.

86 See Morgan-Owen, 'Exploded Ideas'.

87 NMRN, Admiralty, 'War', p. 7, in 'War Plan G.U.'.

88 CAC, MCKN 6/2, Fisher to McKenna, 19 Apr. 1909, p. 7.

89 NMM, Oliver Papers, OLV/12, H. Oliver, 'Volume II of Recollections, written in 1946, covering period 1901–1939', p. 65.

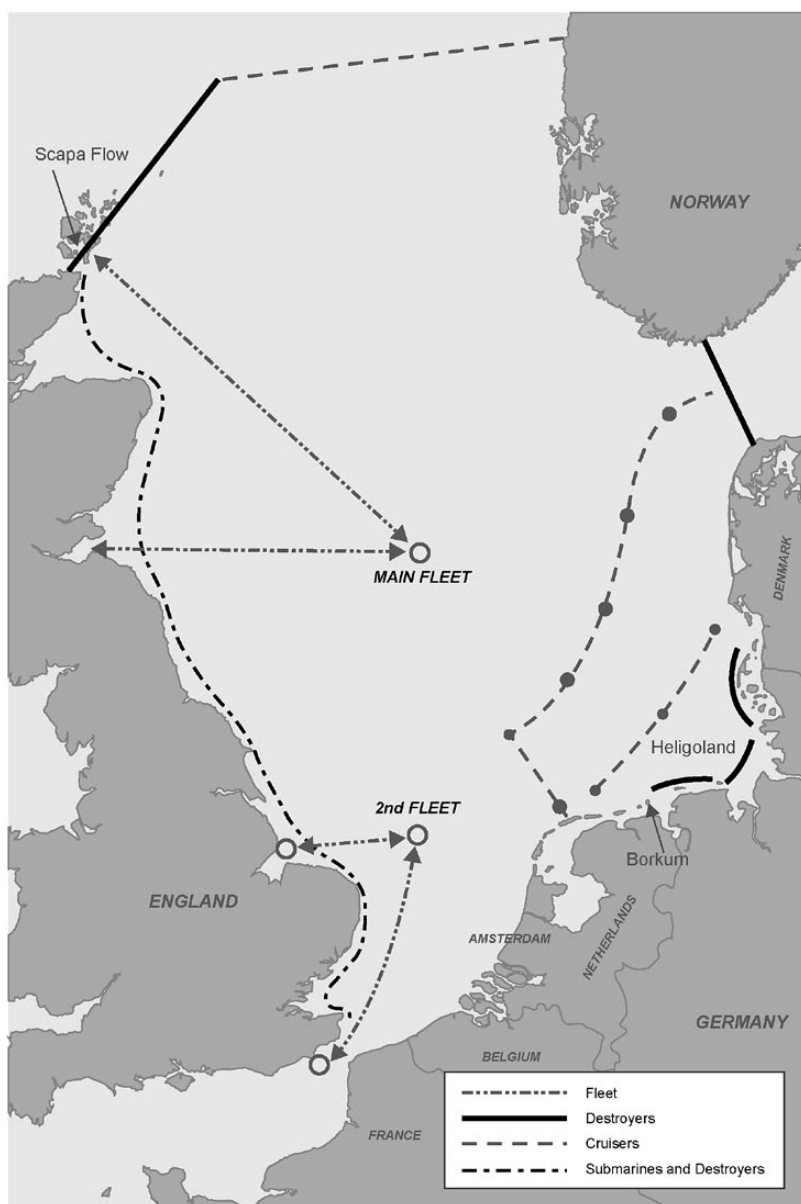


Figure 1: Planned dispositions of the British Fleet in the event of war, 1909; based on one of the charts accompanying the 1909 G.U. War Plans, in CAC, Fisher of Kilverstone Papers, FISR 13/6, Chart War: III, 1909.

Admiralty planning are, therefore, dubious: his statements regarding the necessity of ‘keeping in’ German destroyers were in line with the course of recent naval strategic thought. However, this leaves several important questions unanswered—notably why, when he had

previously opposed such plans, Wilson revived the close blockade in August 1911 and how he intended to meet the danger that German submarines would surely pose to such a strategy? In order to address these points, we shall now turn our attention to the manner in which Wilson's strategic views evolved to meet developments in the situation in the North Sea after he arrived at the Admiralty in January 1910.

II

While the evidence relating to Admiralty war planning under Wilson is fragmentary at best, the surviving documents suggest that he remained opposed to extensive inshore operations when he arrived at the Admiralty in early 1910. After becoming First Sea Lord, Wilson commissioned the newly-formed Admiralty War Division to set about editing the war plans he had inherited from Fisher.⁹⁰ Captain Henry Oliver, who remained in post as the First Sea Lord's naval assistant during the transition from Fisher to Wilson, later recalled how 'the 1st Sea Lord [Fisher] locked up the plans in his safe and when Sir Arthur Wilson relieved him in 1910 he soon scrapped them and made better plans.'⁹¹ These plans took the remainder of 1910 to be drawn up and, when finally ready, it appears that they contained provision for a more limited deployment of force off the German coastline.⁹² By 'scrapping' Fisher's 1909 'G.U.' plans, Wilson demonstrated that he retained his previously stated reservations about close blockade as late as January 1911, only eight months before the CID meeting of 23 August.⁹³ Fisher, who remained keenly interested in naval developments during his enforced retirement, discussed Wilson's proposed strategy with him in the autumn of 1910.⁹⁴ Soon afterwards, he expressed his reservations about Wilson's plans to the C-in-C Atlantic Fleet, Vice-Admiral Sir John Jellicoe:

hardly anyone but yourself ... clearly realizes the immense alteration in both tactics and strategy which the development of the submarine now causes. I am quite sure A.K. Wilson don't [*sic*] realize it, from our conversation together when he was last at Kilverstone.⁹⁵

Fisher's suggestion that Wilson did not comprehend the strategic implications of underwater weaponry has doubtless contributed to the

90 S.R. Fremantle, *My Naval Career, 1880–1928* (London, 1949), p. 151.

91 NMM, OLV/12, Oliver, 'Recollections' II, p. 65.

92 Fremantle, *My Naval Career*, pp. 154–5; TNA, ADM 116/3096, Admiral May, 'Heligoland Bight Blockade Squadron: Preliminary War Orders for Commodore T. in Command', 23 Jan. 1911, p. 6; Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 160–70.

93 Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 163–6.

94 For the date of Wilson's visit (24 Oct.), see Fisher to Mrs. R. McKenna, 26 Sept. 1910, in A.J. Marder, ed., *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone* (3 vols., London, 1952–9), ii, 339.

95 Fisher to Jellicoe, 10 Jan. 1911, in *ibid.*, ii, 349.

impression that Wilson adopted his close blockade strategy as the result of a failure to appreciate the impact of new weapons systems. However, this is far from clear. Some nine months later Fisher defended Wilson's capabilities as a strategist, confiding to a friend that 'I believe I am the only one he ever trusted with his plans' and that the plans Wilson had outlined to him were 'studied and perfect'.⁹⁶ Since Fisher's own solution to the prevailing strategic situation in the North Sea had been a closer investment against the German coastline, it is conceivable that, far from viewing Wilson as reckless for advocating a close blockade, Fisher actually viewed the plans Wilson had formed in early 1911 as being too cautious. This notion is supported by evidence suggesting that Wilson's strategic views altered considerably during 1911.

Scholars have long been aware that, in his testimony to the CID on 23 August, Wilson had informed the sub-committee that 'all the experience of recent manoeuvres showed that close blockade was necessary' because 'the safety of our Fleet depended upon preventing the German destroyers from getting out'.⁹⁷ However, Nicholas Lambert has demonstrated that Wilson's decision to revive the strategy of 'close blockade' was motivated by a desire to prevent both German destroyers and submarines from 'getting out' into the North Sea.⁹⁸ While Wilson did not explicitly link his advocacy of close blockade with the need to contain German submarines at the meeting on 23 August, he subsequently did so, and Lambert has convincingly proven the existence of an intimate relationship between Wilson's advocacy of a close blockade and his desire to limit the danger of German submarines in the North Sea.⁹⁹ However, Lambert has criticised the First Sea Lord's reasoning: 'the ideas Wilson expressed at the 114th CID meeting were very much his own and most certainly did *not* reflect current Admiralty policy'.¹⁰⁰ Lambert's critique hinges upon a series of manoeuvres that the Navy conducted during the summer of 1911. He asserts that these exercises had conclusively demonstrated that the presence of submarine boats in a port under blockade would render the position of the blockading force untenable, but that Wilson 'simply would not listen' to the warnings of subordinates in this regard.¹⁰¹ However, the documents can easily be seen to support an almost entirely opposite viewpoint as to the key lessons of the manoeuvres.

During June and July 1911 the Admiralty conducted a series of exercises between the Navy's coastal defence flotillas, including a number of 'C' class submarines, and a combined force of destroyers and armoured vessels from the 3rd and 4th Divisions of the Home Fleet. Far

96 Fisher to Arnold White, 10 Nov. 1911, in *ibid.*, ii. 414–15, and Mackay, *Fisher*, pp. 430–1.

97 TNA, CAB 2/2, fo. 132, 'Minutes of the 114th Meeting', p. 14. This passage is quoted in Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, i. 392.

98 Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, pp. 205–8.

99 *Ibid.*, pp. 208–11.

100 Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, p. 154.

101 Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, p. 209.

from invalidating the principle of using aggressive inshore operations to reduce the danger from submarines as Lambert claims, these exercises in fact supported the use of such an approach. In order to appreciate this fact, an understanding of the practical difficulties involved in operating the submarine boats of this period is required. Before the exercises began in early June the Inspecting Captain of Submarine Boats (ICS), Roger Keyes, submitted a paper to the Admiralty outlining his views as to the best method of employing submarines in the defence of a port or stretch of coastline. This paper provides a series of insights into the realities of contemporary submarine operations vital to understanding the strategy Wilson outlined to the CID two months later. In his memorandum, Keyes informed the Admiralty that:

In order to get full value out of Submarines it is absolutely essential that they should dive before they are sighted by the enemy. In clear fine weather, provided a good look-out is kept, they should always be able to do so, and under such conditions it is preferable that Submarines should not be accompanied by surface craft ... In hazy weather, such as often prevails in the North Sea, however, they are certain be seen and avoided by an enemy before they can get into a position to attack, and they also run a great risk of coming under gun-fire of fast vessels before they can dive. Under such weather conditions, or, when making a long passage when there is a possibility of falling in with the enemy, they should be accompanied by fast surface craft to scout for them.¹⁰²

Keyes's paper reveals that the extremely limited speed and visibility of contemporary submarines when submerged required them to leave port on the surface, leaving them acutely vulnerable to 'fast vessels' when putting to sea. Indeed, the boats would be so defenceless when leaving port that the Navy considered it necessary to escort its own submarines to sea with armoured cruisers. An aggressive inshore deployment of British destroyers—a close blockade—would thus stand a far greater chance of catching enemy submarines in their most exposed situation, on the surface in shallow coastal waters.

The summer manoeuvres bore out the difficulties that Keyes had alluded to in his paper. While records do not survive for all of the exercises conducted during the summer,¹⁰³ those pertaining to the manoeuvres considered crucial by Lambert are retained in Keyes's personal papers. Despite Keyes's subsequent claims that 'the most ardent supporter of the close blockade could have been left in no doubt as to the menace of submarines to such a disposition', the documents he preserved present a very different picture of the outcome of the exercises.¹⁰⁴ In fact, due

¹⁰² British Library [hereafter BL], Keyes Papers, Add. MS 82456, Keyes, 'Submarines', 3 June 1911, pp. 2–3.

¹⁰³ Additional exercises were conducted later in the month; see TNA, ADM 144/34, Admiralty Mobilisation Department, 'Precis'.

¹⁰⁴ R. Keyes, *The Naval Memoirs of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes I The Narrow Seas to the Dardanelles, 1910–15* (London, 1934), p. 42.

to what one officer described as 'sharp practice' on the part of the blockading destroyers, who simply positioned themselves stationary in the approaches to the port at which the submarines were based, blocking their attempts to get to sea and refusing to heed signals that they had been ruled 'out of action' by the armoured cruisers escorting the submarines, the manoeuvres were something of a farce.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, four days later, in a report he made to Rear-Admiral Lewis Bayly, the officer in command of the exercises, Keyes was obliged to make the striking admission that 'the submarines accomplished nothing'.¹⁰⁶ This statement is markedly different from the description of the exercises which Keyes later developed in his memoirs. That the ICS had considerable faith in the ability of his charges to get to sea past an inshore squadron is clear: he believed that the craft could simply dive under blockading destroyers, if the channel was deep enough;¹⁰⁷ or that, once submerged, the boats might be able to navigate through an inshore destroyer force unseen.¹⁰⁸ However, despite his enthusiasm for submarines, in the aftermath of the 1911 summer manoeuvres he was nevertheless forced to concede that:

One point much emphasized was the great risk submarines run of being caught on the surface in thick weather if they are unaccompanied by surface craft to scout for them.¹⁰⁹

This obliged Keyes to repeat his earlier recommendation that submarines ought to be accompanied to sea by armoured cruisers for the boats' protection from enemy destroyers and light cruisers:

I am sure the principle acted on is the correct one, and that when it is desired to get a Flotilla of submarines out to sea they should be accompanied by Armoured Cruisers.¹¹⁰

Finally, the ICS also revealed to Bayly that, even if the submarines did get to sea, the presence of a large number of destroyers would render their task in sighting and attacking enemy capital ships extremely difficult:

I would add ... that the presence of a large number of Destroyers in the vicinity of the objective is most trying and objectionable to the submarine.¹¹¹

Thus, the exercises highlighted the acute vulnerability of surfaced submarines to such an extent that the Navy considered it vital to escort its own craft out to sea if visibility was limited. Furthermore, the

105 BL, Add. MS 82456, Sandeman to Keyes, 30 June 1911, p. 4.

106 BL, Add. MS 82456, Keyes to Bayly, 3 July 1911, p. 1.

107 BL, Add. MS 82456, Keyes, 'Submarines', 3 June 1911, pp. 3–4.

108 BL, Add. MS 82456, Keyes to Bayly, 3 July 1911, pp. 2–3.

109 BL, Add. MS 82456, Keyes to Bayly, 1 July 1911, p. 4.

110 Ibid., p. 3.

111 Ibid., p. 4.

manoeuvres confirmed that the boats would be vulnerable in shallow water or in narrow channels, such as those in the German estuaries,¹¹² where the underwater evasion of the more freely moving, shallow draft destroyers would be difficult. Finally, even if the boats did get to sea and locate a target, the presence of a large number of destroyers made the boats' task in approaching close enough to engage significantly more difficult.

Conducted as they were around six weeks before Wilson made his presentation to the CID, the experience of the Navy's 1911 'blockade' manoeuvres appear to have been a key factor in convincing Wilson to abandon his earlier reservations regarding extensive operations off the German coastline. It seems that, upon reading the reports of the exercises, Wilson was sufficiently impressed by the potential of using inshore destroyer patrols to prevent German submarines from getting to sea that he revived the key characteristics of Fisher's 1909 war plans. The Admiralty kept detailed reports on the progress of German submarine construction and knew that the German navy had a maximum of ten serviceable boats available in mid-1911.¹¹³ Wilson clearly considered that an aggressive inshore strategy would be an appropriate countermeasure against such a limited number of vessels. Thus, when he informed the CID on 23 August that 'all the experience of recent manoeuvres showed that close blockade was necessary', the First Sea Lord was not disregarding the evidence of the Navy's recent exercises. Rather, he was demonstrating an understanding of the practical limitations of operating submarine boats that eluded both the members of the sub-committee who witnessed his presentation and subsequent scholars alike. Indeed, the manner in which Wilson saw fit to commission the manoeuvres and then rapidly integrated their findings into the Navy's war plans demonstrated an all too rare instance of the potential efficacy of his administration at the Admiralty. It also served to highlight the continuity of Admiralty planning between the Fisher and Wilson regimes: both men, when faced with the challenge of waging naval war against Germany in the North Sea, ultimately arrived at the same strategy of 'closer' blockade.

Significant problems undoubtedly did remain with the plan Wilson outlined to the CID in August 1911. Nonetheless, the naval aspects of the strategy that Wilson described did not indicate a refusal to accept the realities of modern naval warfare, or a failure to appreciate the strategic significance of innovations in underwater technology. Wilson's inability to articulate the rationale behind his plans was a mark of his

¹¹² The Admiralty had conducted detailed hydrographic investigations into the feasibility of using block ships to seal such channels under Fisher's regime, and was thus well aware of the nature of the German river estuaries. See Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 55–6, 61–2, 122–3 and 136–7.

¹¹³ M.S. Seligmann, *Spies in Uniform: British Military and Naval Intelligence on the Eve of the First World War* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 132–42; TNA, ADM 137/3905, NID, 'Notes on German Submarine Construction 1902 to 1912', entry for 25 Aug. 1911.

weakness as a spokesperson and political operator, rather than as a strategist. The contrast between the Admiral's opaque performance and the polished presentation delivered by the urbane Director of Military Operations, Brigadier General Henry Wilson, doubtless contributed to the poor impression that it made.¹¹⁴ Forced into early retirement in December, Wilson acknowledged to his replacement upon leaving the Admiralty that 'Churchill & the solider element...beat him' at the CID.¹¹⁵ Yet this did not spell the end of Wilson's involvement with either the Admiralty or the CID.

III

After Churchill removed Wilson from the Admiralty in December 1911, the Admiral retained his seat on the CID. It was during his continued service on this body that Wilson finally articulated the reasoning behind his close blockade plan which had failed to convince the government on 23 August.¹¹⁶ In 1913 the CID announced the formation of a new sub-committee to re-examine the issue of home defence. The sub-committee sat throughout the rest of the year, finally calling its expert naval witnesses during the autumn and winter of 1913. It was at a meeting of this body on 3 December that Wilson argued his case that inshore operations represented the most realistic solution to the challenge posed by German submarines:¹¹⁷

I think the advent of the submarine is the reason which makes the close blockade absolutely necessary, and that the Admiralty must put its wits together to see how they will keep that close blockade, or else the submarine will get out. The principal danger is the submarine which will get out, and if you cannot keep up your blockade ... that is the base of the whole thing.¹¹⁸

However, by the time that Wilson made these statements in December 1913, they represented a critique of current planning: the Admiralty had felt compelled to abandon attempts to enact a close investment of the German coastline eighteen months earlier, due to increases in German naval capability.

The operational strength of the German navy had grown rapidly after 1908–9 as Tirpitz's building programme produced an increasing number of modern warships.¹¹⁹ This had the effect of reducing Britain's superiority relative to Germany and consequently placed increasing

¹¹⁴ CAC, AGDF 2/1, fos. 92–3, Grant-Duff diary, 25 Aug. 1911.

¹¹⁵ Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Eng. Hist. 768, fo. 13, Bridgeman to Sandars, 12 Jan. 1915.

¹¹⁶ Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, p. 208.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 207–8.

¹¹⁸ TNA, CAB 16/28A, fos. 160–1, Report and Proceedings of Sub-Committee on Overseas Attack, pp. 311–12.

¹¹⁹ See H. Herwig, *'Luxury' Fleet: The Imperial German Navy, 1888–1918* (London, 1987), pp. 54–92.

constraints upon the nature of the operations that the Admiralty considered feasible in the event of an Anglo-German war. As early as 1908, Rear-Admiral John Jellicoe, the Third Sea Lord, had anticipated that, if the current pace of construction remained fixed, a comparison of the two navies in April 1912 would reveal that 'the position is one of great risk'.¹²⁰ Rear-Admiral Lewis Bayly, the Head of the Naval War College, concurred with his colleague's assessment. In 1909 Bayly prepared an appreciation of the strategic situation in the event of a war between Britain and Germany in which he echoed Jellicoe's concerns:

After a close examination of the comparative strength of Great Britain and Germany in battleships and Armoured Cruisers in 1911, the conclusion arrived at is that our Battleship and Cruiser strength is only just sufficient to ensure success.¹²¹

Increases in the pace of British construction after 1909 would ultimately secure the Navy's preponderance in terms of capital ships, but the vessels ordered at this stage would not begin to enter commission until 1913–14 at the earliest. In the interim, the Admiralty was obliged to attempt to decrease its commitment to the Mediterranean in order to concentrate sufficient modern capital ships in home waters to preserve a suitable margin of superiority.¹²² Similarly, the steady growth of the German cruiser, torpedo boat (as the German Navy called its destroyers) and submarine establishments meant that maintaining a constant British presence off the enemy coastline became increasingly difficult after 1910–11. The Admiralty had monitored the steady expansion of the German destroyer force closely since the early 1900s¹²³ and considered the issue to be a matter of the highest priority.¹²⁴ Successive naval attachés were detailed to devote close attention to developments in the German destroyer establishment and, as a result, the Admiralty was well aware that the Imperial German Navy could boast more than 100 such vessels by 1909.¹²⁵ This posed a serious challenge to Britain's ability to mount continuous operations off the German coastline, since doing so would require a significant margin of numerical superiority over the German destroyer force, due to the logistical difficulties involved in operating at a significant distance from home ports. Furthermore, on the basis of intelligence regarding German plans to operate destroyers in conjunction with their main fleet,¹²⁶ the Admiralty came to view destroyers as necessary adjuncts to the British

120 BL, Jellicoe Papers, Add. MS 48990, fo. 59, Jellicoe, 'Strength of the Tail', 1908.

121 TNA, ADM 116/1043B II, fo. 160, L. Bayly, 'Sketch of the Action Necessary for War with Germany Alone', 1909.

122 C.M. Bell, 'Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution Reconsidered: Winston Churchill at the Admiralty, 1911–1914', *War in History*, xviii (2011), pp. 333–56.

123 See BL, Arnold-Forster Papers, Add MS 50296, fos. 53–4, H.O. Arnold-Forster, 'Destroyers, New Type Required: Inefficiency of Present Type', 30 Mar. 1903.

124 Seligmann, *Spies in Uniform*, pp. 132–6.

125 TNA, ADM 116/1043B II, fo. 166, Bayly, 'England v France and Germany', 1909.

126 Seligmann, *Spies in Uniform*, pp. 134–5.

battle fleet.¹²⁷ Only the largest, most seaworthy British boats could fulfil this role, further limiting the number and quality of destroyers available for operations off the German coastline.

Finally, the growth of the German submarine arm, which could boast fifteen vessels by the spring of 1912,¹²⁸ threatened the armoured vessels required to support the inshore destroyer screen. Thus, just as the British superiority in armoured warships narrowed and the Admiralty reduced the level of risk to which it was prepared to expose its high-value units, the threat to large ships operating near the German coastline appeared to increase. As a result of this combination of factors, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Francis Bridgeman, was obliged reluctantly to inform the Fleet in April 1912 that 'the Blockade by the British Fleet of the whole German Coast on the North Sea is to be considered as cancelled.'¹²⁹ His reasons for doing so were articulated later in the year by the Director of the Operations Division, Captain George Ballard: 'submarines, torpedo craft, and mines are a constant menace to the blockaders' and 'under such conditions ... an effective watch is virtually impossible'.¹³⁰

In place of deploying vessels off the German coastline, the Admiralty had continued to experiment during 1912 with a series of mid-North Sea patrols, none of which approached within a hundred miles of the German coastline and which were thus of no use in preventing the exit of German submarines into the North Sea. This had resulted in the Admiralty becoming increasingly hesitant to deploy the Fleet towards the German coastline, since, in the absence of any inshore operations against the German exits, hostile submarines, destroyers and torpedo craft could penetrate deep into the North Sea without the C-in-C or the Admiralty knowing of their whereabouts.

Churchill grew frustrated with the apparent inability of any of his professional advisors to offer any practical solution to this problem.¹³¹ In February 1913 he chided the new First Sea Lord, Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg: 'it is impossible by a purely passive defence to guard against all the dangers wh[ich] may be threatened by an enterprising enemy.'¹³² Attempting to recapture some of the strategic initiative of earlier naval administrations, Churchill formed his own improvised group of planners, distinct from the Admiralty War Staff, to generate new schemes and ideas.¹³³ One of the officers included in this group

127 J. Brooks, 'Grand Battle-Fleet Tactics: From the Edwardian Age to Jutland', in R.J. Blyth, A. Lambert and J. Rüger, eds., *The Dreadnought and the Edwardian Age* (Farnham, 2011), pp. 183–211.

128 TNA, ADM 137/3905, NID 'Notes on German Submarine Construction', entry entitled 'Programme of Construction of Submarines'.

129 TNA, ADM 116/3096, Admiralty to Callaghan, Apr. 1912.

130 TNA, ADM 116/866B, fo. 285, Ballard, 'Remarks on War Orders for an Observational Force in the North Sea in connection with the lessons of the 1912 Manoeuvres', 16 Sept. 1912, p. 1.

131 Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 181–9; C.M. Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 37–8.

132 TNA, ADM 116/3412, Churchill to Battenberg, 17 Feb. 1913.

133 Grimes, *War Planning*, p. 183.

was Rear-Admiral Lewis Bayly. Bayly had played an active part in the formation of Fisher's ambitious 1909 war plans during his time as Head of the Naval War College¹³⁴ and, as we have seen, had subsequently been the senior officer present at the 1911 'blockade' manoeuvres that had informed the strategy which Wilson presented to the CID on 23 August. As such, he was ideally placed to present the benefits of a more aggressive strategy, although it is unclear whether Churchill selected him on this basis. What we can say with certainty is that in January 1913 Churchill instructed Bayly to be 'prepared to investigate and report on the question of seizing a base on the Dutch, German, Danish or Scandinavian Coasts for operations of Flotillas on the outbreak of war with Germany.'¹³⁵ Bayly duly provided him with the view that such operations were of vital importance. He explained that:

We cannot maintain sufficient observation force of light cruisers, and flotillas ... unless we seize a convenient base on or close to the German coast, because we have nothing like enough vessels to do so, nor are we ever likely to have enough.¹³⁶

Bayly's logic was exactly that which had resulted in both Fisher's move to a closer blockade in 1908–9 and in Wilson's decision to revert to a close blockade in the summer of 1911. However, his paper did not impress either the Chief of the War Staff, Vice-Admiral Sir Henry Jackson, or Battenberg. The notion of seizing an advanced base also generated staunch opposition from Vice-Admiral Sir George Callaghan, the C-in-C of the Home Fleet, and other elements within the Admiralty planning apparatus.¹³⁷ While naval officers were in general agreement regarding the desirability of capturing such a base, the consensus of opinion at the Admiralty was that such an operation would entail risks out of proportion to the potential rewards. The question of how best to resolve the strategic dilemma created by the abandonment of operations against the German coastline dominated the Admiralty's strategic discourse until well after the outbreak of the War.¹³⁸ The War Staff examined various solutions, including modified cruiser sweeps¹³⁹ and an expanded use of British submarines off the German coastline.¹⁴⁰ However, none of these contingencies were ready for implementation by

¹³⁴ NMM, OLV/12, Oliver, 'Recollections' II, p. 65.

¹³⁵ TNA, ADM 137/452, fo. 7, Admiralty to Bayly, 31 Jan. 1913.

¹³⁶ TNA, ADM 137/452, fo. 10, Bayly, 'Remarks', 17 Mar. 1913, p. 1.

¹³⁷ Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 184–9.

¹³⁸ For more detail see D.G. Morgan-Owen, 'An "Intermediate Blockade"? British North Sea Strategy, 1912–1914', *War in History*, forthcoming, xxii (2015).

¹³⁹ The key documents on this topic are located in TNA, ADM 1/8372/76, ADM 1/8239 and ADM 1/3088. Also see Morgan-Owen, 'Intermediate Blockade'.

¹⁴⁰ Lambert, *Fisher's Naval Revolution*, pp. 288–91 and 294–6; C. Martin, 'The Complexity of Strategy: "Jackie" Fisher and the Trouble with Submarines', *Journal of Military History*, lxxv (2011), pp. 441–70; C.M. Bell, 'Fisher's Naval Revolution Reconsidered', pp. 333–56; Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, pp. 34–8; C.M. Bell 'On Standards and Scholarship: A Response to Nicholas Lambert', *War in History*, xx (2013), pp. 381–409; and Morgan-Owen, 'Intermediate Blockade'.

mid-1914. Thus, in July 1914 it was decided to make a more expansive, if still limited, use of the Grand Fleet periodically to 'sweep' the North Sea. This strategy, based upon proposals Wilson had submitted after leaving the command of the Channel Fleet in 1907,¹⁴¹ consisted of traversing the North Sea in superior force in the hope that such movements would deter the Germans from making any meaningful sorties for fear of being overwhelmed.¹⁴² It was hoped that this approach would limit the danger of German raids or invasion and allow the Navy to continue to preserve British trade and to strangle the German economy from afar, without the risks involved in a close blockade. Such was the Navy's strategy at the outbreak of war in August 1914.

IV

Within days of the outbreak of war, it became obvious that German submarines could operate further into the North Sea than had previously been appreciated. Vessels of the Grand Fleet reported submarine sightings in the latitude of the Orkneys within the opening week of the War: the light cruiser HMS *Birmingham* successfully rammed and sank one such craft on the morning of 9 August.¹⁴³ The verifiable presence of enemy submarines so close to the Grand Fleet's primary anchorage at Scapa Flow caused the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, a considerable degree of anxiety. His worries were magnified by reported sightings of an enemy submarine inside the anchorage on 1 September.¹⁴⁴ A second scare occurred six weeks later on 18 October. Such sightings suggested that the Germans had the capability to sink strategically vital British capital ships at anchor, even in northern harbours, and by so doing tilt the balance of power in the North Sea in their favour. This would have significant consequences for communications with the British Expeditionary Force on the Continent and with their French allies. It might also threaten Britain's vital trade routes to the Empire and the rest of the world, without which the country could not effectively participate in the war. The gravity of the situation led the Admiralty to allow Jellicoe to remove his command to the west of Scotland on 19 October and to remain at Lough Swilly on the northern Irish coast for the remainder of the month, while improvised defences were hurriedly put in place at Scapa Flow.¹⁴⁵ However, the removal of the Fleet to Ireland, remote from the North Sea, prejudiced the Navy's ability to defend the vulnerable eastern coastline. After German battle

¹⁴¹ Wilson, 'Remarks on the War Plans', in Kemp, ed., *Fisher*, ii. 455–8.

¹⁴² TNA, ADM 116/3096, Admiralty, 'War Plans, Part I—General Instructions', July 1914, p. 5.

¹⁴³ TNA, ADM 137/414, fo. 13, Jellicoe, '8.0 a.m. Saturday, 8th, to 8.0 a.m., Sunday, 9th August' in 'G.F.N. August, 1914'.

¹⁴⁴ Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, ii. 66–7.

¹⁴⁵ See entries in TNA, ADM 137/416, fos. 85–128, 'G.F.N. October, 1914' from 22–31 Oct. 1914.

cruisers succeeded in bombarding the coastal town of Yarmouth on 3 November and escaped without loss, the pressure on Churchill to redress the situation in the North Sea intensified.¹⁴⁶ Churchill chafed at the seeming impossibility of altering the unsatisfactory strategic situation in the North Sea. Temperamentally unsuited to presiding over a strategy of 'steady pressure',¹⁴⁷ he attempted to revive earlier plans to seize an advanced base off the German coastline.

Churchill had in fact advocated schemes for amphibious operations against the German coastline even before the war began.¹⁴⁸ However, the plans that he had put forward in July and August 1914 were far less ambitious than those Wilson had proposed in 1911 and did not involve attempts to try and exercise control over the entire German North Sea littoral. As Churchill had explained to his naval colleagues on 9 August, by seizing an advanced base he hoped merely to 'maintain an active surveillance', 'to give the destroyer flotillas a chance of fighting German destroyers by gunfire in their own waters', and 'to give the C class submarines a part in the oversea warfare from wh[ich] they are now excluded, & thus compensate to some extent for our deficiencies in numbers of big boats'.¹⁴⁹ He made no mention of attempting to 'seal in' German destroyers or submarines, as Fisher and Wilson had previously intended. Indeed, he appears to have viewed the capture of an advanced base and the closure of German exits to the North Sea as entirely distinct at this stage—as was demonstrated in a further memorandum on 19 August, in which he stated that blocking the Kiel Canal with sunken hulks was the only reliable means of 'sealing in' the German Fleet.¹⁵⁰ Churchill's initial wartime advocacy of amphibious operations was thus less ambitious than the plans that Wilson and Fisher had previously contemplated. However, as it became increasingly clear that the action of German submarines was beginning to dominate the strategic situation in the North Sea, Churchill began to consider alternative proposals. Rather than aiming simply to maintain an 'active surveillance', his goal became to find a solution to the problem of German submarine warfare.

This process began at some point in late August or early September, when Churchill and Battenberg discussed the desirability of seizing an advanced base with Sir Arthur Wilson.¹⁵¹ The precise reasons for the naval leadership meeting with the retired Admiral remain unclear. What we can say with certainty is that soon afterwards, on 10 September,

¹⁴⁶ Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, ii. 130.

¹⁴⁷ Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, p. 54.

¹⁴⁸ TNA, ADM 137/452, fo. 137, Churchill to Asquith, 31 July 1914; Richmond diary, 9 Aug. 1914, in A.J. Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral: The Life and Papers of Sir Herbert Richmond* (London, 1952), p. 96.

¹⁴⁹ TNA, ADM 137/452, fos. 208–10, Churchill to Battenberg and Sturdee, 9 Aug. 1914.

¹⁵⁰ M. Gilbert, ed., *The Churchill Documents VI At the Admiralty* (1993; repr. Hillsdale, MI, 2008), pp. 45–6, Churchill memorandum, 19 Aug. 1914.

¹⁵¹ TNA, ADM 137/452, fo. 212, Wilson, 'The Capture of Heligoland', 10 Sept. 1914, p. 1.

Wilson submitted a lengthy paper to Churchill on the desirability of seizing an island off the German coastline. This document, presumably a summary of the discussion that had occurred days earlier, bore considerable resemblance to the plans Wilson had presented to the CID in August 1911, with several notable additions. As had been the case in 1911, it was characterised by aggressive inshore operations intended to meet the threat of German submarines and torpedo craft in the coastal waters off the principal German ports. Marder, convinced that Wilson was 'obsessed' with capturing the Island of Heligoland, dismissed these proposals as unrealistic.¹⁵² However, to do so is to overlook the reasoning behind Wilson's submission: as had been the case in 1911, Sir Arthur's main focus was on finding an effective means of conducting anti-submarine operations in the shallow waters of the Heligoland Bight. After explaining his plans for seizing Heligoland, Wilson's paper went on to spell out unambiguously the rationale behind his scheme:

The best method of destroying the enemy's submarines is to lay and maintain mines systematically in the channels at the mouths of the rivers and this cannot be done while Heligoland commands the approaches. If we lay the mines the enemy would quickly sweep channels through them.¹⁵³

Pre-empting questions regarding how to hold the island, Wilson explained that it might not be necessary to do so, given that 'the best defence of the island would be the effective blocking of the rivers by mines and watching the entrances by Submarines so as to make it difficult and dangerous for the enemy to come out at all.'¹⁵⁴ The seizure of Heligoland was not, therefore, central to Wilson's scheme. Rather, his plan was defined by aggressive inshore anti-submarine measures. Indeed, it appears that Wilson was somewhat of a pioneer in this regard. The Director of the Intelligence Division, Rear-Admiral Oliver, later recalled that Sir Arthur had originated new techniques of mining intended specifically to counter the menace of German submarines as part of his scheme, claiming that Wilson had 'invented anti-submarine mine nets and deep minefields'.¹⁵⁵ The scheme Wilson proposed to Churchill in September 1914 was thus the culmination of the ideas he had formed as the result of the Navy's 1911 'blockade' manoeuvres: he advocated mounting a close blockade of the German exits in order to mine the narrow channels of the German river estuaries shut and to 'seal in' enemy submarines. As had been the case in August 1911, Wilson's ideas were in line with the Navy's own most recent thinking on anti-submarine warfare. Before the outbreak of war, the Admiralty Submarine Committee had recommended 'a system of mining channels

¹⁵² Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, ii, 182–4.

¹⁵³ TNA, ADM 137/452, fo. 218, Wilson, 'Reasons for Capture of Heligoland', 10 Sept. 1914, p. 7.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9, fo. 220.

¹⁵⁵ NMM, OLV/12, Oliver, 'Recollections' II, p. 116.

used by hostile submarines off their own ports' as a potentially effective submarine counter-measure.¹⁵⁶

The addition of an extensive inshore mining campaign to the plan Wilson had formed in 1911 had the additional benefit of reducing the need to support the British flotilla forces operating in the Bight with armoured warships, as mining would 'seal in' German surface craft and submarines alike. This formed a central aspect of Wilson's 1914 proposals.¹⁵⁷ Crucially, from Churchill's perspective, Wilson's proposals thus contained the potential to remove the primary objection of the War Staff and senior Flag Officers to operations against the German coastline; namely that the Fleet would be obliged to run significant risks supporting such attacks. If successful, such an operation might transform the strategic situation in the North Sea and thus provide the government with a greater degree of flexibility in the distribution and employment of Britain's naval and military resources—the desirability of which the Cabinet increasingly accepted as the winter drew on. Moreover, establishing the observation of the German coastline could dramatically reduce the threat of invasion, a danger that the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, considered sufficient to justify withholding troops in Britain for defensive purposes, despite the urgent need to reinforce the front in France.¹⁵⁸ Controlling the German North Sea coastline may also have enabled more serious consideration of plans to penetrate the Baltic in order to threaten the German iron-ore trade with Scandinavia, or to conduct operations against the vulnerable Baltic littoral. Such naval operations therefore presented Churchill with the attractive possibility of facilitating a major re-focusing of Britain's war effort.

Nevertheless, despite the potential benefits of the scheme, Churchill remained sceptical as to the practicality of Wilson's plan. A conference of senior Flag Officers held at Loch Ewe on 17 September unanimously rejected the scheme, on the basis that the Fleet would be unable to 'reduce' Heligoland sufficiently to facilitate unencumbered operations in the Bight.¹⁵⁹ In the aftermath of this meeting, Churchill allowed Wilson's suggestions to lay dormant for several months. Heeding the consensus of naval opinion, he even stated his absolute opposition to such operations, informing his Cabinet colleagues on 18 October that 'it is not possible by blockade mines to stop a fleet from putting to sea' and

¹⁵⁶ BL, Add. MS 82455, Report of the Submarine Committee, 5 May 1914, p. 4.

¹⁵⁷ Lambert has claimed that Wilson opposed an extensive use of mines in the North Sea; see *Planning Armageddon*, pp. 300–2 and 312–13.

¹⁵⁸ K. Neilson, 'Kitchener: A Reputation Refurbished?', *Canadian Journal of History*, xv (1980), pp. 209–10; D. French, *British Strategy and War Aims, 1914–1916* (London, 1986), pp. 44, 212; W. Philpott, 'Kitchener and the 29th Division: A Study in Anglo-French Strategic Relations, 1914–1915', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, xvi (1993), pp. 375–407, at 381; and G.H. Cassar, *Kitchener's War: British Strategy from 1914 to 1916* (Dulles, VA, 2004), pp. 34–5, 66, 100–1 and 110–12.

¹⁵⁹ TNA, ADM 137/1939, fo. 108, Jellicoe, 'Conference on Board "Iron Duke". 17th September. Report by the Commander-in-Chief', Sept. 1914, p. 1.

that 'still less is it possible to stop the enemy's submarines from putting to sea, either by ambush mines or blockade mines'.¹⁶⁰ However, amid the fallout generated by the Yarmouth raid of 3 November, Churchill grew convinced that decisive action to improve the strategic situation in the North Sea was urgently required. Encouraged by an Admiralty report stating the suitability of the Navy's existing stock of mines for use in the shallow waters off the German coastline,¹⁶¹ Churchill saw fit to re-examine Wilson's proposals. The very same day as the German bombardment of Yarmouth, he brought Wilson back to the Admiralty as an advisor and saw to it that he received copies of all key planning documents.¹⁶²

V

Scant trace exists of the development of Churchill's thought processes regarding Wilson's mining proposals during November and December 1914. He was yet to be persuaded of the value of Wilson's scheme on 2 December, as he put forward a proposal for the capture of the Island of Borkum off the Dutch coastline, in which he made no mention at all of inshore mining.¹⁶³ As had been the case hitherto, on this occasion the resolute opposition of his professional advisors frustrated any further consideration of Churchill's plan.¹⁶⁴ However, what is clear is that the Admiralty's concerns regarding the action of German submarines in the North Sea and English Channel continued to grow as the year progressed. On 4 December, the Admiralty sent a general letter to all of the senior officers in Home Waters requesting that they submit their remarks on the best methods of combatting the menace of enemy submarines.¹⁶⁵ This prompted an extensive series of responses, with many commanders passing the request down to their captains for additional comments. One proposal in particular appears to have had an extremely significant impact upon the course of Churchill's strategic thought. It came from the ubiquitous Vice-Admiral Lewis Bayly, now serving as the commander of the Grand Fleet's 1st Battle Squadron. As we have seen, Bayly had been associated with both Fisher and Wilson's plans for extensive operations off the German coastline and had previously stated his support for the seizure of an advanced base in order to establish British control over the German littoral in the spring of 1913. It must therefore have come as little surprise that Bayly's submission on anti-submarine warfare was predicated on the belief that,

160 TNA, CAB 37/121/126, Churchill, 'Notes on Mining', 18 Oct. 1914, p. 3.

161 TNA, CAB 37/121/136, P. Dumas and E. Charlton, 'Notes on Mining', 24 Oct. 1914.

162 Richmond diary, 3 Nov. 1914, in Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral*, p. 124.

163 TNA, ADM 137/452, fos. 165–8, Churchill, handwritten memorandum, 2 Dec. 1914.

164 TNA, ADM 137/452, fos. 173–6, de Bartolome to Churchill, Dec. 1914; and fos. 182–3, Oliver, untitled memorandum, 15 Dec. 1914.

165 TNA, ADM 137/1046, fo. 18, Draft Letter, 4 Dec. 1914.

as he put it, 'an evil is best cured by cutting at the root'. He proposed to sink blockships in the channels to the German's newly-captured forward submarine base on the Belgian coastline at Zeebrugge, and advocated seizing the Island of Borkum, in order to facilitate the maintenance of a permanent British presence off the mouth of the German river estuaries, 'so that submarines coming out stand a chance of being seen while in shallow water'. Bayly considered that these operations could be supplemented by sinking additional hulks in the channels of the river Ems to negate the submarines' ability to proceed to sea submerged and by mining the approaches to the Jade, Weser and Elbe.¹⁶⁶

While not placing the same emphasis upon sealing the German river estuaries with mines as Wilson had done in September, Bayly's plan clearly bore considerable similarity to Sir Arthur's earlier suggestions. Given Bayly's previous advocacy of such operations, his proposals may not seem particularly significant. However, what made the Vice-Admiral's submission so important to Churchill was not its content but the reaction it received from the C-in-C Grand Fleet, Admiral Jellicoe. Hitherto the C-in-C had been a staunch opponent of operations directed against the German coastline, citing the danger to the Fleet as an insurmountable obstacle. Yet, when he forwarded Bayly's paper to the Admiralty, Jellicoe hinted at a tentative willingness to support aspects of his subordinate's plan. In his covering letter, the C-in-C stated that:

I am in favour of blocking as a general principle, but the channels to the Ems are so wide that blocking would not be effective. Mining would be preferable and might be effective in destroying one or two vessels before the channels were swept clear.¹⁶⁷

While still intimating his opposition to any attempt to seize Borkum and stating his preference for placing mines further out to sea than Bayly proposed, Jellicoe thus gave cautious support to the principle of inshore mining as a means of countering the German submarine threat in the North Sea. He expanded upon his position four days later:

In forwarding the remarks of Vice Admiral Sir Lewis Bayly on this subject, I expressed my concurrence with many of the ideas, the leading feature of which was the principle of dealing with the hostile submarines, as far as possible, off the enemy's ports. This cannot, of course, be carried out in the case of all the ports, but where it is feasible, I think it should be done.¹⁶⁸

Jellicoe's submissions were far from stating unequivocal support for Bayly's scheme, but they appeared to Churchill to offer a potential foundation upon which it might be possible to establish a consensus

¹⁶⁶ TNA, ADM 137/1046, fos. 86–7, Bayly, 'Reply to Admiralty Secret Letter', 9 Dec. 1914, pp. 1–2.

¹⁶⁷ TNA, ADM 137/1046, fo. 81, Jellicoe to Admiralty, 11 Dec. 1914.

¹⁶⁸ TNA, ADM 137/1046, fo. 106, Jellicoe to Admiralty, 15 Dec. 1914.

of naval opinion in favour of an aggressive inshore mining campaign against German submarines. Jellicoe's cautious advocacy of the proposals appears to have had a considerable effect on Churchill. The main obstruction that remained to the implementation of any such scheme was the absolute opposition of the C-in-C, Fisher and the War Staff to any operation that might place the Grand Fleet at undue risk. In his covering letter, Jellicoe had made clear that he considered risking even a few light cruisers off the German coastline to be inadvisable.¹⁶⁹ Thus, for any inshore operations to receive the consent of his professional advisors, Churchill had to find a means of divorcing his plans from any reliance on the close support of the Grand Fleet. Acknowledging the unanimity of naval opinion on this point, he therefore formed a new plan, based on Wilson's mining proposals. By the end of December, Churchill had created a synthesis between Wilson's inshore mining scheme and Bayly's plan to capture the Island of Borkum, which was less remote and less well defended than Heligoland.¹⁷⁰ Churchill apparently hoped to combine Wilson's mining campaign with the seizure of a more accessible advanced base from which to maintain the minefields. Due to the greater distance between Borkum and the German coastline, such a plan would not necessarily require the Grand Fleet to enter the Bight in support of the bombardment and landings. Furthermore, it could potentially enable the Royal Navy to combat the menace of German submarines, without tying the Fleet to the defence of Borkum, since the mines in the Bight would 'seal in' the German Fleet.

It has been customary to view Churchill's advocacy of capturing the Island of Borkum and Wilson's so-called 'Heligoland' proposals as distinct and separate.¹⁷¹ However, a close inspection of Churchill's correspondence reveals that this was not the case. While in early December Churchill had advocated the capture of Borkum as an isolated measure,¹⁷² by the end of the month his proposals had been adapted significantly to include the key features of Wilson's inshore mining plans. On 31 December Churchill explained the fusion of his advanced base plans with Wilson's Heligoland operation in a letter to Asquith:

The British must capture a German island for an oversea base as soon as possible; must mine on the most extensive scale the channels and rivers of the German coast; & from their advanced base must prevent the mines from being removed.

The only island that fulfils the necessary conditions is Borkum.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ TNA, ADM 137/1046, fo. 81, Churchill to Admiralty, 11 Dec. 1914.

¹⁷⁰ *Churchill Documents*, vi. 343–5, Churchill to Asquith, 29 Dec. 1914.

¹⁷¹ Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, ii. 176–90. See also Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, p. 300.

¹⁷² TNA, ADM 137/452, fos. 165–8, Churchill, handwritten memorandum, 2 Dec. 1914.

¹⁷³ *Churchill Documents*, vi. 348, Churchill memorandum, 31 Dec. 1914.

Furthermore, he informed the Prime Minister that he intended to cover the minelaying operation by deploying forty B and C class submarines along with sixty first-fleet destroyers into the Bight for five days, thereby removing the need for the Fleet to maintain itself in German-controlled coastal waters.¹⁷⁴ This proposal represented a major departure from his earlier paper of 18 October, in which he had opposed inshore mining. Nevertheless, though Churchill consistently opposed the indiscriminate sowing of mines through large areas of the North Sea as advocated by Fisher,¹⁷⁵ he became an advocate of an inshore mining campaign, as originally proposed by Wilson, from late December 1914 onwards. Indeed, Churchill may have frustrated Fisher's schemes for mining the Heligoland Bight precisely because he wanted to conserve mines for use in the direct approaches to enemy ports.¹⁷⁶ A key factor in his reasoning appears to have been the failure of the existing minefields laid in the Channel to prevent the passage of the Straits of Dover by German submarines operating from captured bases on the Belgian coast.¹⁷⁷

Having settled upon a potentially workable plan, Churchill moved quickly to try and confirm Jellicoe's support, which would be crucial to implementing any such operation. On 11 January 1915 he wrote to the C-in-C explaining his belief that an inshore mining campaign, supported by submarines and destroyers operating from Borkum, would mitigate Jellicoe's previous objections that the Fleet would be tied to the defence of any advanced base that might be captured. Acknowledging the concerns of Jellicoe and the War Staff regarding the exposure of the Grand Fleet to an unnecessary degree of danger in support of any such operation, Churchill informed Jellicoe that:

I was thinking of the island operation as the first step in an aggressive warfare which would, as it proceeds, cow the enemy; beat him into his ports, and mine and wire him in there. Except for that purpose, the capture would be a mere burden.¹⁷⁸

The reference to 'wiring', a form of submerged netting intended to prevent submarines from passing between or under mines, confirms that Churchill had reversed his previous objections to inshore mining for anti-submarine purposes. Furthermore, it reveals that he had adopted the principle behind the plans Wilson had advocated since 1911: combatting the danger posed by German submarines by engaging them in their most vulnerable position in their own coastal waters. By

¹⁷⁴ For the exact numbers, see TNA, ADM 137/452, fo. 192, Churchill minute, 3 Jan. 1915.

¹⁷⁵ For Fisher's views, see Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, iii. 121–3, Fisher to Churchill, 4 Jan. 1915, and attached paper, 'Minelaying'.

¹⁷⁶ For Churchill's opposition, see *Churchill Documents*, vi. 323–4 and 325–6, Churchill to Fisher, 21 and 22 Dec. 1914.

¹⁷⁷ *Churchill Documents*, vi. 269, Churchill to Fisher, Wilson and Oliver, 19 Nov. 1914.

¹⁷⁸ *Churchill Documents*, vi. 402, Churchill to Jellicoe, 11 Jan. 1915.

the time that he wrote to Jellicoe, Churchill had already issued top-secret instructions that 'all preparations should be made for the capture of Sylt [the codename used for the Borkum expedition]'. Demonstrating his intimate involvement with the plans, Wilson's name was included on the tightly restricted distribution list for the minute, below that of the First Sea Lord, Fisher.¹⁷⁹

Churchill had clearly been won over by Wilson's reasoning. Establishing control over the German North Sea coastline represented the only reliable means for the Navy dramatically to alter the strategic situation in northern waters and make a major and highly visible contribution to the Entente war effort. By early 1915 Wilson and Churchill believed that doing so would limit the danger enemy submarines posed to the Fleet and potentially open the way for a more expansive employment of naval resources. Churchill's change of heart on the desirability of an advanced base did not go unnoticed. On 12 January, the day after Churchill had written to Jellicoe, Admiral Bridgeman (whom Churchill had removed from the post of First Sea Lord in controversial circumstances at the end of 1912)¹⁸⁰ wrote to a friend that:

It is interesting to hear of the project of seizing a base on German soil for a submarine depot. There is nothing new in it, its [*sic*] merely a revival of an old idea ... It doubtless w[oul]d be one of the Frisian Islands, & probably 'Wangeroog' which lies at the Mouth of the 'Jade' & is almost in the fair way to Wilhelmshaven—a *big undertaking* ... When commanding the Home Fleet I was asked by Wilson to arrange for an attack on the place [Borkum] ... but Churchill laughed at the idea & in consequence the scheme went by the board! It is therefore interesting to hear of the revival of old projects!¹⁸¹

Exactly how close these plans came to being enacted remains a matter of historical debate.¹⁸² However, in early 1915 circumstances intervened to postpone any final decision. On 1 January a pre-dreadnought battleship, HMS *Formidable* of the Channel Fleet, was lost to an enemy submarine. It was widely considered that Bayly, who had been transferred to command the force in preparation for the attack on Heligoland, had failed to take adequate precautions, and he was duly removed from command for carelessness.¹⁸³ Thereafter, Churchill's initial intention to make the attacks on either 1 March or 15 April was deferred as a consequence of the logistical implications of the Cabinet's decision to

179 TNA, ADM 137/452, fo. 303, Churchill minute, 3 Jan. 1915.

180 Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, i. 259.

181 Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. Hist. 768, fos. 12–14, Bridgeman to Sandars, 12 Jan. 1915.

182 For the best recent analysis, see Black, *British Naval Staff*, pp. 104–30; G. Clews, *Churchill's Dilemma: The Real Story Behind the Origins of the 1915 Dardanelles Campaign* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2010); Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 197–211; and Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, pp. 54–75.

183 Grimes, *War Planning*, p. 201.

embark upon a naval attack at the Dardanelles.¹⁸⁴ However, Churchill was quick to return to his plans: as early as 3 March Fisher noted that Churchill had proposed detailing Wilson to re-examine the Borkum scheme.¹⁸⁵ The timing of this move was highly suggestive, coming as it did less than two weeks after the commencement of unrestricted German submarine warfare against allied trade on 18 February.¹⁸⁶ When Churchill articulated the detail of his plans at the end of the month, the centrality of anti-submarine warfare to his renewed advocacy of the Borkum scheme was clear. In a memorandum on 24 March he stated that:

The object is to close up the mouth of the Jade and Weser & the Elbe, first by lines of mines & secondly by lines of anti-S/M [submarine] nets, & so protect these minefields from disturbance by monitors & destroyers wh[ich] are themselves not afraid of S/Ms.¹⁸⁷

As had been the case in January, however, significant obstacles remained to implementing the scheme, not least Jellicoe's ambiguous attitude. Jellicoe later recalled that he never shared the view that the capture of an advanced base could assist in driving the German Navy from the North Sea and stated that 'to suggest that we could mine them in their harbours as the result of the capture of Borkum is ludicrous'.¹⁸⁸ Fisher's attitude to the scheme, which Marder reasonably described as 'crucial' to the plan's implementation, was also highly ambiguous.¹⁸⁹ It appears that Fisher preferred the less ambitious policy of sowing large areas of the North Sea with mines and relying upon a policy of 'steady pressure' to wear down the German war effort.¹⁹⁰ Nevertheless, Churchill was clearly convinced of the necessity of pushing the scheme through. This key difference of opinion may have contributed to the final breakdown of the Fisher–Churchill relationship in May.

Assessing exactly how close the Wilson–Churchill scheme came to implementation is beyond the scope of this article. What is clear, however, is that Fisher deeply resented the fact that Churchill had accepted Wilson's proposals over his own. In the notorious list of 'demands' that Fisher sent to Asquith after resigning his post in May 1915 the Admiral stipulated that, in order for him to return, he required 'that Sir A.K. Wilson leaves the Admiralty and the Committee of Imperial Defence and the War Council, as my time otherwise will be occupied in resisting the bombardment of Heligoland and other such wild projects'.¹⁹¹ He also complained to Jellicoe that '*A.K. Wilson at*

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ *Churchill Documents*, vi. 622, Fisher to Churchill, 3 Mar. 1915.

¹⁸⁶ Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, ii. 344.

¹⁸⁷ *Churchill Documents*, vi. 736, Churchill memorandum, 24 Mar. 1915.

¹⁸⁸ Quoted in Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, ii. 190.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 190–8; Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 203–11.

¹⁹⁰ Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, pp. 296–324.

¹⁹¹ Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought*, iii. 241, Fisher to Asquith, 19 May 1915.

the Admiralty is a REAL danger! While I was there it did not signify, as I nullified him'.¹⁹² Nevertheless, Churchill's correspondence from December 1914 onwards clearly demonstrates that his preference was for a Wilsonian inshore mining campaign, intended to reduce the danger from German submarines operating in the North Sea and possibly to facilitate an attempt to penetrate the Baltic.

VI

That Churchill had been convinced that Wilson's inshore mining contingencies represented the most realistic anti-submarine warfare option available was confirmed by a detailed proposal he made to the Cabinet in the summer of 1917. After his return from his self-imposed political exile on the Western Front Churchill rejoined the Cabinet as Minister of Munitions in July 1917. By this point, the threat that German submarines posed to Britain's war effort had become acute. In a newly declared campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare, German forces succeeded in sinking 3,843,765 tons of Allied and neutral shipping between February and July 1917; a 'veritable slaughter on the shipping lanes'.¹⁹³ As a consequence, the volume of shipping entering British ports in February and March 1917 represented only a quarter of what it had been a year earlier.¹⁹⁴ By mid-April the Cabinet had become deeply concerned by the worsening losses, and by the summer the Admiralty had been induced to introduce a system of convoys.¹⁹⁵ However, before the convoy system had been fully established or proven, Churchill had presented the Cabinet with an expression of his own views as to how best to defeat the German submarines. This paper demonstrated the extent to which he had been impressed by Wilson's views on inshore mining and the manner in which his previous support for the seizure of an advanced base should be viewed in the context of anti-submarine warfare.

At the outset of his remarks Churchill criticised the Admiralty's existing policy of 'distant blockade and nothing else'. As an alternative, he proposed a 'return to the old and definitely recognised policy of close and aggressive blockade'.¹⁹⁶ He argued that:

The objects of inshore operations are to fight the enemy, to harass him constantly, to occupy and dominate his attention, to force him to recall many of his submarines for his own defence, to provoke him to engage in frequent action both with his flotillas and heavier vessels, and generally to beat him into port and thereafter to mine him in closely with minefields

192 Ibid., iii. 252, Fisher to Jellicoe, 31 May 1915.

193 Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, iv. 102–3.

194 Ibid., iv. 105.

195 D. French, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition, 1916–1918* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 67–73.

196 TNA, CAB 24/19, fo. 417, Churchill, 'Naval War Policy, 1917', 7 July 1917, p. 4.

so dense as to be a series obstruction to submarines, and to keep him in by sinking any vessels he may send to sweep a channel.¹⁹⁷

As he had done in 1914–15, Churchill criticised Fisher's preferred policy of 'scattering mines and sowing minefields a considerable distance out to sea'. In contrast, he informed the Cabinet that seizure of an advanced base would permit the Navy

To mine them [the Germans] in ever closer and closer, blocking particularly all those channels which are deep enough for submarines to come out and go in by. Great numbers of mines set at different depths, or strung together in necklaces, would be laid on a comparatively small arc before the enemy's debouches, but at sufficient distance from his batteries; and these would be effectively watched and guarded.¹⁹⁸

Wilson, who remained at the Admiralty throughout the conflict, stoically assisting the war effort, had clearly created a considerable impression on the young minister. Ultimately, it was not until the attempt to block the channels at the Belgian ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge, key forward bases for German submarines, in April 1918 that the principles behind Wilson's plans were enacted.¹⁹⁹ However, it is significant to note that, by this point, an impressive list of highly respected officers advocated such operations, including Beatty, Keyes, Tyrwhitt, Pound and Bayly.²⁰⁰ While the operation was only a limited success at best,²⁰¹ its eventual acceptance by Jellicoe and the Admiralty demonstrated the wide basis of support that now existed for the principles behind the plans that Sir Arthur Wilson had advocated since August 1911.

At the height of the Agadir Crisis in August 1911, Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson proposed to the government that, in the event of an Anglo-German war, the Navy should mount a close blockade of the entire German North Sea coastline. His presentation received a cool reception from the assembled ministers and experts, and ultimately precipitated Wilson's retirement before the end of the year. His performance has contributed to the perception that the Admiralty lacked a functioning planning apparatus and that the Navy failed to offer a coherent alternative to the General Staff's Continental strategy. Moreover, it has also led to condemnation of Wilson's own abilities as a strategist and administrator.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., fo. 418, p. 5.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., fo. 425, p. 19.

¹⁹⁹ See Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, v. 45–66.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ M. Karau, 'Twisting the Dragon's Tail: the Zeebrugge and Ostend Raids of 1918', *Journal of Military History*, lxvii (2003), pp. 455–81.

However, upon closer inspection, the plans Wilson described to the government in 1911 represented an almost seamless continuation from those promulgated under his predecessor, Admiral Sir John Fisher. Furthermore, far from displaying a failure to grasp the realities of modern naval warfare and of underwater weaponry, Wilson's presentation was based upon the Navy's most recent experiments in anti-submarine warfare. Indeed, Wilson possessed a far more detailed and accurate understanding of contemporary naval strategy than either his audience or his subsequent critics. This much was confirmed when Winston Churchill revived the rationale behind the plan Wilson had presented in 1911 after meeting with the Admiral during the autumn of 1914. Thereafter, Churchill gave his own iteration of Wilson's updated proposals his full support and lobbied hard for their implementation as a means of countering the danger posed by German submarines for the remainder of the First World War.

While the practicality of the ambitious amphibious operations Wilson advocated to the CID in August 1911 was clearly open to serious question, the substance of the naval portion of his strategy—the close blockade—was far more credible than has hitherto been appreciated. The choice that the Liberal government faced in 1911 was thus not one between a moribund, unworkable naval strategy and a 'continental commitment'. Rather, the government was presented with the equally unpalatable options of providing direct military support to France, or imperilling diplomatic ties with Paris by pursuing a maritime strategy. Wilson may have been a poor spokesperson for the latter option, but the government's rejection of his scheme was based upon considerations far broader than particular issues of blockade doctrine. Ultimately, it was the government's failure to define its intentions, not the capabilities of its professional advisors, which militated against the formation of a coherent national strategy prior to the outbreak of war in 1914.

This interpretation of the evolution of Admiralty planning between 1905 and 1915 demonstrates the need for further research into British naval policy both before and during the First World War. In particular, it highlights the limitations in our current understanding of the formation of the Admiralty War Staff in 1911–12. While such a body could certainly have produced and maintained more extensive and detailed planning documents, such as those the War Office had presented at the meeting on 23 August, a War Staff was not required to steer the course of Admiralty strategy. It is instructive to note that, within months of the outbreak of war, Fisher and Wilson—the two men most directly responsible for the course of naval strategic planning prior to the creation of the War Staff—had both been recalled, largely due to the Staff's apparent inability to provide sufficient direction to the naval war effort. That Wilson's advice came to be heeded in preference to that of the Staff which he had been retired for opposing simply serves to underline this fact.

Furthermore, the emphasis that many historians have placed upon the supposedly transformative impact of new technologies, particularly underwater weaponry, has failed to account for the way in which the Navy evolved to meet new challenges. Nowhere is this better illustrated than by the fact that the Navy's 'traditional' strategy of close blockade was gradually developed into a progressive solution to the challenge posed by submarine warfare. This has contributed to the inaccurate depiction of Wilson as a retrograde strategist, whereas, despite his numerous failings and unco-operative nature, he was nothing of the sort. In particular, the presentation of Wilson as a reactionary force who reversed many of the more far-sighted policies that Fisher had inaugurated prior to 1910 ignores the continuities in strategic outlook between the two men. Fisher and Wilson adopted the same solution to fighting a war against Germany in the North Sea: a 'closer' blockade of the German coastline. The unanimity of opinion between Fisher and Wilson demonstrated in this article therefore explains both Fisher's advocacy of Wilson as his successor in 1909–10 and his subsequent efforts to defend Wilson's capacities as a strategist.

It also has wider implications for our understanding of naval policy after the outbreak of war. The dynamic at the Admiralty during this period was not one of competition between Fisher's mining scheme and Churchill's advanced base proposals.²⁰² Rather, it was one between two rival mining schemes: Fisher's indiscriminate plan to close the North Sea, and the Churchill–Wilson aggressive inshore anti-submarine mining campaign. The differences of opinion between Fisher and Churchill on the direction of the Navy's war effort therefore pertained to questions of conventional naval strategy: Fisher considered the Borkum plan to be too risky, whereas Churchill viewed it as an indispensable anti-submarine warfare measure and as a means of establishing British control of the North Sea. It was surely no coincidence that Fisher's fleeting advocacy of the Dardanelles campaign, which he later came to rue, took shape on the same day that Churchill ordered preparations for the capture of Borkum.²⁰³ However, the fact that the veteran First Sea Lord was firmly against what he considered to be such 'wild' schemes, does not mean that those schemes were unrealistic.

Kings College, London

DAVID GETHIN MORGAN-OWEN

202 Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, pp. 303–24.

203 *Churchill Documents*, vi. 367, Fisher to Churchill, 3 Jan. 1915.